

THE BROKEN GATE

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by

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VISION

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for
Antoine de Saint Exupéry
wherever he may be

The virtuous life consists in abstention from the ten sins: murder, theft, fornication, falsehood, slander, insult, gossip, envy, hatred, dogmatic error.

—THE TRIPITAKA

THE BROKEN GATE

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I

FOG LAY like guncotton over the river. Complete as a shroud, thick with water smells, it held the Clément Marot in the half-world of interrupted passage. Everything was still, soft-breathing, isolated. Then off to the right, somewhere in Saigon, there was the reverberation of a distant gong, a single note peeled from some immensity of mellow sound. And as if it were a cue, through the fog began to sift the strange excitement, the sense of perpetual life laced with sadness and decay, of Indo-China.

Shepherd stood at the rail, grinning a little, wryly. That was how he once might have described it—back when it was a professional habit to sop up new scenes which later drained out through his forefingers. And now he didn't even carry a typewriter in his luggage. He should, he knew, to help that "author" in his passport. This was a pretty small town, and he might again need props to set up the protective coloration which his two books and the brief-lived play had granted him in so many strange places.

A purser with a check-off list was at the head of the gangplank, engaged by the usual clot of passengers who queue up at the end of any trip of any length on any means of transport, anxious to be the first to disembark. As the purser permitted, they dribbled ashore, wondering why they had been so impatient. Shepherd was moving casually toward them when a voice at his elbow said, "Pardonnez-moi, M'sieur Shepherd." His breath checking, he turned.

The chief steward held a thick pad of slips. "You have forgotten your bar chits."

"But didn't my man take care of them?"

"No, m'sieur."

Shepherd looked angrily down the deck. "Lem!"

A small dark man stacking a pile of handbags flinched and

looked quickly around. Straightening, he came toward them, delicately as a careful cat. "Yes, sir?"

"You forgot my bar bill."

Lem's glance went to the sheaf in the steward's hand, then broke apologetically against his employer's set expression. "I would have remembered before going ashore."

"Get on with what you have to do," in open irritation. "I'll meet you in the customs shed."

"Yes, sir."

As he went quickly away Shepherd indicated the chits. "I'll take care of them myself."

"I will attend for M'sieur."

"Never mind." He pulled a bill from his pocket and, passing it over, with the other hand took the chits. Nodding, he turned and started back down the deck. The steward watched him go, contemptuous and perplexed.

In the bar, Taras, the hardware drummer, balanced plump hips on a stool at the counter. Beside him Peggy George was outlined against the dark wood.

"Having a last one for the road?"

The girl's blue eyes came quickly up at him. "Why—I thought you'd g-gone!"

Taking a stool, he dropped the chits on the counter. "Slip-up on these. The Sûreté grabbed me just as I was sneaking down the gangplank."

The barman did not smile. "Scarcely that, m'sieur."

"Thanks," coldly, "faith is a beautiful thing."

"W-won't you j-join us, Mr. Sh-Sh——"

"Shepherd."

Puzzlement was on Taras's face. "How odd! To now, Miss George, you scarcely have been stammering at all. I have noticed before that whenever Mr. Shepherd comes——" He broke off unhappily. "I am sorry. I did not mean to imply that——"

"But of course I'm the reason," Shepherd told him. "There's something about me that upsets people."

"There s-sure is! You!"

He brushed a finger across her scrap of indignant nose. "Don't

you mind," he said, gentleness strange in his harsh voice. "If I ever have a daughter, I hope she sounds just like you. It's as fetching a thing as I ever noticed a girl do."

"I bet!" The tint was deepening in her cheeks. "Besides, men like you d-don't have ch-children. A g-good thing."

Taras cleared his throat. "You will be in Saigon for a space, Mr. Shepherd?"

"My plans are vague."

His tone was so flat that Taras again looked uneasy. "Ah, to be an author!" he plunged on placatingly. "No schedule, no responsibilities—merely to buzz like a bee around, gathering up impressions, digest them at leisure, then deposit them for a fortune."

When Shepherd asked, "Isn't nature wonderful, Miss George?" she gave him a still-furious look.

"Mr. Taras is r-romantic—which is more than can be s-said of some writers I've met!"

"Obviously." He smiled, and his cold-hewn face became that of an impishly evil small boy. "But don't let it worry you, Mr. Taras. I hear it's no worse than a bad cold."

The drummer eyed him uncertainly, then brought out a tentative laugh. "You Americans! Your talk sometimes is so difficult to understand."

"It's a form of argot—English, roughly speaking. Maybe because of what we've done to their language is why the British always think we should be chums—when they need us."

This time the laugh was more genuine. "If all your compatriots were so wise, your country might be better off."

Czech hell, Shepherd thought; were the Farbenindustrie boys back in business already? He shrugged, and asked: "Is this a long stop for you?"

"Only a few days, alas. If conditions permit, then I start inland to Siam, and down the peninsula through Malaysia. Three, maybe four months. I have been telling Miss George again of the salesman's hard life."

"Miss George has a hard life too. Did you know that she needs both eyes to wink with? Show him, Miss George."

"I will n-not!"

"Oh, now, such unkindness to a man heading for all those crummy little lost towns? But maybe you need another drink to get in the mood. The same for these good people," he told the barman. "Gin sling for me."

"Please, Mr. Shepherd!" The annoyance Taras clearly had been attempting to control was stiffening his voice. "Miss Peggy is having, in your term, a stirrup cup with me. I am happy to extend the invitation to you as well."

"Oh, but I'm intruding, it should be my——"

"N-now, gentlemen, don't f-fuss. N-nice men like you h-have been buying me drinks all the way from Singapore. L-let this last one b-be my treat."

Shepherd shook his head. "I never accept gifts from ladies unless there's diamonds in them."

Taras's smile of acceptance faded. "Of course we could not permit you to pay."

"All r-right, then, if you're going to be so s-silly—we'll m-match for it." She took three coins from the handbag on her lap, handed one to each man, and held hers up in a clenched fist. "Odd man's p-pleasure!"

"Good enough." Shepherd rubbed his closed hand across his forehead, then extended it toward her.

Taras put his coin down on the counter beneath a large thumb. At the girl's command, he uncovered a tail.

"I've g-got heads!" As Shepherd showed tails, she cried, "I win!" delightedly. "It's on m-me!" She snatched up the slip which the barman had put down with the drinks. "Just l-like I wanted it in the f-first place!"

Shepherd raised his glass to her. "Well, here's hoping that job in Shanghai is all that you're expecting."

"It had b-better be," with a frown. "I'm a long way f-from home." She turned to Taras. "I'm sorry you w-won't be there. I just h-hate opening in c-cabarets with nobody you know out f-front."

"But you have a stopover here," he said, leaning toward her with his mouth open. "We may be able to see each other—do some things—for a time, no?"

"I most certainly h-hope so. There's nothing l-like friends in a strange city, is there? Goodness!" as a gong sounded. "It's t-time to be getting off." Digging around in her bag again, she pulled out a slimmer sheaf of chits than Shepherd's. Like his, an addition figure was clipped to them. "I almost f-forgot my bill too. M-mercy, how a f-few little old drinks add up!"

"Here, just put them with mine," Shepherd said.

"Oh, but I couldn't p-permit that——"

"You can get even some night ashore."

Taras coughed again. "No, no—this time I insist."

"Forget it. Having Miss George in my debt is something to look forward to."

"Mr. Shepherd, you force me to remind you that I was here with Miss George first!"

"Now, now, b-boys—quarreling over s-such a little thing." Suddenly she smacked her hands together. "I know! Let's m-match again and see who p-pays *all* our bills!"

"You're a good sport." Shaking the coin in his hand, Shepherd gave her a quick tap on the hip. "But maybe Mr. Taras isn't willing."

"Of course I am! You think maybe I am not a good sport?" The color up in his neck, he took a similar packet of slips from the pocket of his jacket and put them with the others. Then he picked up his coin and again shielded it on the polished wood.

"What have you g-got?"

Taras lifted his hand. "This time heads."

"Oh—tails for me!"

Shepherd opened his fist. "Tails here too. You win, Mr. Taras."

"Two out of three, no?" Taras asked, new perspiration on his forehead.

"I concdde," Shepherd said, and pushed the bundles of slips toward him. "Well, good luck to you both. Not, of course, that Mr. Taras needs it. Or does he?" Standing, he bowed and, as the drummer reached slowly for his wallet, left them.

On deck he found that the fog was lifting. Under the strengthening sun the composite reek of Asiatic waterfronts increased—

copra, spice, hemp, crude oil, dung, and dead fish. From a shapeless mass the port had taken on a pattern. Winches were yanking loads up from the hatches and swinging them over onto the dock. There coolies in cone-shaped hats, their legs bowed under the weighty humps on their backs, crisscrossed like ants to and from the freight sheds. A Tricolor hung over a corrugated iron building smaller than the rest; that would be where Lem was swearing that Mr. Jack Shepherd, en route, had nothing to declare. Except (and he admitted the piracy with a bland grimace) his genius.

He glanced back to the head of the gangplank. Though the knot of disembarkers had loosened and was flowing more freely down to the dock, he continued to linger; his need to hurry was gone. He looked casually out over the city toward the purple horizon that swept up at the rim of the flat plains. Slowly, and then more rapidly, the antenna of his specialized sense began to absorb murmurs. Excitement started to rise in him, as in a lover feeling vibrations from the body of his beloved. It was here, he could feel—the gambling chance, the dangerous edge, the tight point which asked everything and got it as quick nerves keyed mind and muscle up for another contest with his own bright Medusa. Yes, there was something here for him—

What? That was the teaser, the canapé: what was it to be? Anticipation raised the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, and he started forward again, toward it—even as behind a mimosa bush up near the Falls of Khon a small brown man wedged the stock of a flimsy musket into his delicate shoulder, the back of a mounted garde militaire settling into his line of sight.

That was five hundred kilometers away—yet, with such immediacy does action become history, this receptive stranger on the coastal steamer might have been stirred by its passing spirit, his hunger feeding on a minutia of the report which sounded behind the legionnaire. If so, he might also have heard an echo of heart thumps as that lucky soldier checked his horse and looked back toward the ambush behind which the little guerrilla was lying with part of his head gone and broken pieces of breech embedded in the rest.

Then there was, as well at this moment, here in a fine section of the city before him, a solid block of a man tapping lightly, pleadingly, on a door with a fist that could have punched through it like paper.

And, too, over in the native quarter, what of the young woman, her face scarred with lines of rage and exasperation, who was pounding on a table and screaming across it at a shrugging, imperturbable Chinese?

It is questionable whether the souls of these events, even now escaping as they were performed and made pieces of the past, were what touched Shepherd. He could not and did not know. He only felt that some delightful promise was sweeping to him across this slumbrous land—that he had come to a good place for what he liked.

The deck officer looked up to see him approaching, and thought immediately of a big black horse that had come out of the paddock chute at Auteuil. His bored eyes filmed over as the day came back in its soft greens, with the tan sweep of manicured track threateningly punctured by jumps, the glittering movements of women's middles under light clothing, and this big merde of a horse walking out like a fist under the nose of the crowd and causing the price to drop.

"Shepherd."

"Of course M'sieur Shepherd," the officer said politely, thinking for the thousandth time that in three more years he would have saved enough for the little bistro in Rue Cambon, and be free of this everlasting niceness to these snobs of style. "Adieu, and a pleasant stay in Saigon."

"Could be," Shepherd said, imitating his empty smile. He was midway down the cleated boards when suddenly the sun ate up its final gauze bandage, and somewhere off to the right a bugle blew. He laughed, and without knowing why turned and looked back up at the deck. The mate was watching him, his eyes surly and envious. Raising a hand in a rude gesture, an awareness of the immediate future rising like liquor in his heart, he went on down to the dock.

Lem was waiting in a taxi beyond the customs shed, their luggage piled in another. He nodded smugly to Shepherd's questioning look. "Ten piastres and they shot me through like a streak."

"That's the best way to shoot you, if they only knew it."

The ricksha rank, tumultuous with calls of hire, was lined up a few feet away. For a moment he considered using one of the frenzied petitioners, then got in the cab. It might be best to arrive at the hotel formally; he wanted no urgency about their bill at the end of the week, from doubt that he was either money-conscious or eccentric. Yet the need for having to think in such a way, to consider carefully, drove away his good feeling. Trepidation began to build in his stomach.

It persisted during the ride up Rue Catinat, and later, in his suite at the Continental. Checking back, he could find no reason for it. There were no apparent loose ends behind—why, even his bar bill on the ship had been paid!—and everything since had gone smoothly, even to Lem's passage through the customs without having to register their guns. The desk clerk had been agreeably deferential in confirming the reservation and assigning rooms. The police forms? That damned French thoroughness! Still, if the Rangoon thing hadn't been properly covered there would have been trouble at sea. Certainly their visas would never have been passed before they left the *Clément Marot*. No, they seemed to be out in front and running free. Could this persistent tremor be a matter of health? A fine time to pick up an amoeba!

Going to the bedroom, he looked inside. Lem was bent over an improvised ironing board, pressing a suit of evening whites. On the bed lay a pile of used linen from an open kitbag. He smiled at the little man's absorption in his chore, his serene finding of something to do so soon after landing in this new country they were going up against.

"Why didn't you have that stuff cleaned aboard?"

"I didn't think it would be wise to show that we left Singapore in such a hurry."

"Think of everything, don't you?"

"As much as I can." He ran the iron gently along a crease. "Of course if I knew more——"

"You might pop off more?"

Lem bent lower, but added color showed on top of his fore-shortened cheekbones. "Aren't you ever going to forgive me for that?"

"Which 'that' do you mean? Which time? The one in Madras?"

As he spoke the name, memory drew him back to a door opening into a cool plain room, and the pearl merchant sitting at his desk smiling a welcome that had something wrong with it. Then the sudden impulse which had made him throw his weight against the door, pinning the killer hidden behind it against the wall long enough for him to get his own gun out. . . . And then running down the alley, seeing in the dark, flashes of rage and happiness bolting through him, even in his haste knowing that he would neither beat nor abandon Lem for making another slip. For if Lem had not talked out of turn someplace a trap would not have been set up—and only part of the stuff would be in his pocket, instead of all of it. And, as well, he would not be having this feeling that was better than pearls. The excitement that did more for him than anything—women, liquor, or good reviews.

He saw that Lem was watching him like a boxer anticipating a move, heard him saying, ". . . twice in four years was all. I didn't talk, did I, when they gave me the hose in Ankara? Did I? All night I just kept saying they'd made a mistake."

Shepherd's face softened. "Yeh, you were all right—that time." Suddenly he did, for him, an unusual thing: putting out his hand, he rubbed his palm against the older man's ear. "Of course they'd have killed you if you'd told them what they wanted to know."

Lem's head bent to hold the gesture briefly between his face and shoulder. "If I had, you'd have been next."

Shepherd dropped his hand. "Me? The distinguished American man of letters? Don't be silly. If you'd cracked I wouldn't even have known you."

An affectionate grin peeked up at him. "Who came for me—with his hands in his pockets?"

"Those were flags I was going to pull out if I had to. American and French. If mine didn't work, they could have buried you in yours."

"They didn't look like anything but guns to those boys. Or me either."

"They were dumb." His voice cooled. "And so are you. Dumb and mouthy—both at the wrong time. That's why I haven't said what I have to do while we're here. So have a good time—this is closer to home than you've been for years—and stop looking inquisitive. I don't trust you any more, Lem."

There was a little silence, then the iron began to creak over the linen again. "That's the most—bad thing you ever said to me. You weren't like this before——"

"That's enough of that!"

A tear fell from the bent face and struck at the hot cloth. "But you weren't," he sniffled stubbornly.

"And stop bawling on my pants! I only meant you're liable to get loaded and ruin the deal! I didn't mean you, personally. I know better than that. I—oh, to hell with it!"

Turning angrily, he went back into the living room. He was splitting open a box of cigars when the telephone rang. His knuckles jumped up, hard and white against the frail wood, the pace of his breath increasing.

Lem came to the door, pale lines around his nose. "It's for you. A man from the Sûreté."

"What's he want?"

"To talk to you for a few minutes."

"All right. And order up some brandy."

As he went back to the phone he bit the end from a cigar. Had they got to Carrington? Unlikely—that limey knew his way around the Bosphorous. This job? Well, he certainly was in the clear so far. It was probably no more than a routine checkup; but still . . .

Lem returned from the bedroom, swift and quiet as an alert animal. "He'll be right up. What do you think it is?"

"How should I know?"

"And if it's a pinch?" Almost automatically his hand brushed against his coat, unbuttoning it.

"You frog dummy! That's all we need!" The casual movement had touched off his obsession like a spring released; but even as he began to tingle with it, he found the premonitory lump back in his belly. He shook himself savagely. "There isn't a place they wouldn't dig us out of in an hour—if we had one to hide in!" His hand jerked toward the bedroom. "Lock that door and listen. If he takes me, go out the hall door and down the back stairs to the basement. There must be an alley exit," as he held out his wallet. "Find a lawyer and send him over to the cop house right away."

"Maybe they'll give you the hose," Lem said with a grin. "Do you think you can take it?"

"Beat it. And if it's nothing, keep out of that money. I know how much is there."

The door buzzer sounded. Lem went back into the bedroom and locked the door. Lighting the cigar, Shepherd called, "Come in."

II

INSPECTOR DUPHAINE of the Service de Sûreté, on special duty in Saigon, had brought with him a flavor of the sharp, intellectualized efficiency of the Paris Brigades. A youngish man with streaks of polished scalp showing through his neutral-colored hair, he had not been in the room for five minutes before Shepherd knew him as one who worshiped the law, bowed down to its tenets, and would consider as strange and immediate enemies those who moved a foot outside its exact framework. His was the pure type of European police mind to which black is black, white is white—a suspect was guilty or innocent, and give proof that you were the latter. No "business" could be done with this

detached agent; there was no human equation about him. If you were on the other side of the fence you were his prey—to be hunted, trapped, boxed, and killed. Break the rules, and he was your precise adversary until your score was settled, as the book said.

Yet, like so many zealots, he was likable in his singleness of interest—a conclusion brought to Shepherd when he found that the purpose of the call was social, as a stamp collector might seek out a kindred spirit who had seen the Calcutta Black plain. Duphaine had read his books!

"Imagine with what pleasure I learned of your arrival," he was going on, eagerness pulling him to the edge of his chair. "To have you here, the chronicler of the apache days in Chicago! How thrilling to a student of criminology!"

"You're kind—but make me feel like an English instructor being congratulated on his master's thesis that Bacon wrote Shakespeare. Sins of one's youth, Inspector. Most of the big racket names were either dead or in the sneezer when I got my first job on a Chicago paper. The ones I met were usually just hoodlums wanting silk shirts without working for them. Scum."

"But your writings, M'sieur Shepherd! Your subjects were beasts, of course—but resourceful and often brave." He hesitated. "Great opponents."

"For whom? Other scum and cops on the take? No, they wouldn't have interested you, after a bit. It was hacks like me who built them up," he went on, his voice heavy with self-disdain. "Romanticized them. I did it to get out of newspaper work. That's my only excuse, bad as it is."

"Mr. Shepherd . . ." He paused and then asked, "May I ask if this aversion is why you have published so little in the past few years? Of course there was the war, but——"

A warning tapped lightly somewhere in his consciousness; it might be this visit was not so innocently appealing as it had seemed, he thought, summoning a rueful smile. "The war gave me material—my sort of thing on a larger scale—if I'd used the opportunity. Instead I was retyping official press handouts, and signing them with a date line."

"Ah, so you were a correspondent?"

"Yes." His smile deepened inwardly. Would it be considerate to an admirer to say more? Of being fired from the Shanghai Mercury in 1936 . . . of the years thereafter, which had seen him—and then Lcm—weaving westward until Hitler's strike into Poland gave him a job with the Middle East bureau of his old Chicago paper, until the routine of filing dispatches again bored him and they moved on . . . of the problem of maintaining credentials, sometimes with the legitimate help of wire services or desks with faulty coverage, but mostly through the aid of gifted forgers . . . and then, when it was over, the doubled and redoubled route through Turkey, Egypt, India, with his literary front still forming a respectable shield for more lucrative projects.

"Yes," he repeated, "a correspondent. That used up time, of course. But the real reason for my silence is work of a more—extended nature."

"I shall look forward to it." Duphaine rose. "Nevertheless, I find it lamentable that you write no more of—as you say, your sort of thing. Saigon should be a source of much interesting material."

"Oh?"

"Much. We watch closely, of course, but consider our location. Bounded by Siam, China, the Malay States, and the sea. We offer a natural port of call for adventurers of all kinds."

The warning sounded again. "Yes, I can see how that would be. But adventurers of what type, mostly?"

Duphaine looked out the window to where on a building across the square a Tricolor hung limply in the sun. "As you know, we have been undergoing a sad, futile conflict here in Indo-China, a tragedy caused by certain factions among the Annamese who mistrust our good intentions toward them." He continued to gaze at the flag and, in astonishment, Shepherd saw that his eyes were swimming with love. "During the war, France was extremely popular in this country—still is," quickly, "save in certain quarters. But when the fighting was over, the measures necessary to restore our sovereignty—the French Expeditionary

Force, for instance—were interpreted by these malcontents to many others as evidence that France intended to re-establish colonial rule in its entirety.”

“Absurd, of course.”

Duphaine gave him a bleak look and went on steadily, “Resistance blocks developed. But although you seem dubious, our position has not changed. That is, in event that you are unfamiliar, freedom of the Annamese people within the framework of the French Union and the Indo-Chinese Federation, and, if they wish it, unification in whatever manner they desire. What, in all reality, more could they wish?”

“Well—complete independence, maybe?”

The inspector turned his head, but so slowly that Shepherd, abruptly conscious of his mistake, was ready with an ingenuous smile for the level eyes in the hardening face. Resuming, Duphaine’s voice was as calm as before, but there was an edge on it.

“I spoke of realities. Need I point out that attitudes toward idealism may differ between secure nations and those who depend upon outside sources for economic health? Yours is a rich, self-sustaining land. Try for understanding of those not so fortunately situated—those which must hang onto what they have or fall apart.”

“I can appreciate that,” Shepherd assured him, “even though I imagine natives with a dream of freedom might not.” As Duphaine’s stiffness perceptibly increased, he knew that he dangerously had extended his tactlessness. He laughed placatingly.

“Still, who am I to have opinions? Politics above the ward-heeler mark isn’t precisely my cup of tea.”

Duphaine again looked out the window. “You must forgive me if I doubt your naïveté, charming American characteristic though it may be. If you are so uninformed, however, you differ considerably from the entrepreneurs I mentioned—mercenaries who would gain a few francs out of family troubles. Men, as you might say—or once might have said—with angles.” He turned with a tiny, courteous shrug. “But if all that sort of thing is

behind you now, I should not weary you by mentioning it. Nor by taking any more of your time——”

A door buzzer sounded. “Come in,” Shepherd called, and with a restraining smile: “I’ve sent for an *apéritif*. A meeting like this must have a small salute.” Regretting the irritation which had caused him to speak unwisely, plagued by an increasing suspicion that there were warnings under his visitor’s careful amenities, his back was to the open door. But as he saw Duphaine’s eyes widen, heard his breath go in sharply, he knew that it was not the waiter who opened the door.

“Tricks or tr-treat! Oh, excuse——”

Framed in the doorway, Peggy George might have been painted by Bonnard in his gayest period. Her heavy blond hair was pulled back from her face by a ribbon which complemented her eyes. Open sandals bound her stockingless feet, and a thin pongee dress—unassisted, he was certain—attempted to cover the lines of her magnificent natural endowments.

“I had n-no idea you h-had company, Mr. Shepherd——”

Obviously startled, she looked like such a clean fresh baby and at the same time the epitome of healthy sex that a grin forced through his annoyance. He beckoned her forward. “Come in, Miss George—I’d like you to meet my friend, Inspector Duphaine.”

“Inspector?” She hesitated briefly, then came toward him like wind over a stand of ripe wheat. And as always when she became excited or nervous, the soft stammer clogged her speech. “It’s a p-pleasure—b-but I do hope I’m n-not intruding.”

As she took Duphaine’s hand, Shepherd flecked him with a quick glance. Color was beating up noticeably into the sallow cheeks. Cheered by the discovery that Duphaine was not entirely a policeman, he told her they were just expecting a drink. “Won’t you join us?”

“Why, I’d love to, if I w-wouldn’t be in the w-way.”

“To the contrary—you’re just what we need.”

She turned her beaming face to Duphaine. “Mr. Shepherd and I m-met on the boat from Singapore. I don’t want to make a n-nuisance of myself, but it’s so l-lonely being alone in a

strange city, now isn't it? Or d-don't you get lonely, Mr. Inspector?"

"Indeed, yes." With an obvious effort, Duphaine was keeping his gaze on her eyes. "But I am certain that you cannot be prone to such suffering."

The quality of his regard, so familiar since she was fifteen, made her feel easier. She had no difficulty in saying, "Oh, you're just saying that to be polite."

"Mademoiselle, I assure you that there are times when politesse is but the truth of a confessional!"

Her thick white neck flung up her head; laughter like a gaudy banner rolled across the hot room and spilled out into the wilted world outside. Taking Duphaine's arm, she led him to a divan, talking like a faulty machine gun.

A waiter with a tray appeared in the open doorway, and at a nod from Shepherd took it to a side table. He had just drawn the cork from the cognac when the telephone rang. There was a break in Peggy's chatter, but she immediately began to talk again, faster. As Shepherd was signing the tab Lem opened the bedroom door.

"A call for you, sir."

"A lady?" Peggy asked. "Already?"

"I hope so. That was a long trip."

"Men!"

"Excuse." He indicated the glasses to Lem—"Fix these, will you?"—and holding haste out of his stride went to the inner room. Closing the door, he picked up the phone.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Jack Shepherd?"

"Yes."

"From Chicago?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if I have the right one?"

"My middle name is Victor."

"This is Bijou."

"Hello, Bijou."

"By any chance are you free this evening?"

"Yes."

"Then might we have a visit?"

"Of course."

"Around eight, then?"

"What address?"

"In Cholon District. Just ask for my place," she said, hanging up.

He sat for a minute on the bed, considering how well she had played it. If the wire was tapped, who was to suspect that they had never met before?

Duphaine's eyes lifted as he re-entered the living room, and this with Peggy leaning to him, with brandy half to his lips. Cop, all right . . .

"Good news, Mr. Shepherd?"

"Promising."

"It must have been. You seem to—glow."

Shepherd decided against being led into a lie. Lem handed him a drink and he raised it, saying: "Well, to us."

They drank. The inspector put down his glass and again stood up. "This has been pleasant. I hope that soon I may return the favor." He bent over Peggy's hand. "You can reach me at the Sûreté building, if you wish me to speak to M'sieur Dracot."

"Mr. Duphaine has been a-awfully kind," she told the inquiring lift of Shepherd's eyebrows. "Seeing it's two weeks before my b-boat for Shanghai, he thought maybe I'd like a fill-in job here at the C-Casino. He says he can f-fix it with the proprietor for an audition. Now isn't that nice?"

"Well, I've heard work keeps people out of mischief."

"A sound theory," Duphaine said, moving toward the door. "One I subscribe to—from experience."

"It was nice of you to call, Inspector."

"My pleasure, I assure you." He bowed to Peggy. "Au revoir, mademoiselle."

Shepherd offered his hand. The answering grip was surprisingly hard. "If there is anything I can do for you, please do

not hesitate to call me. Or if"—his voice slurred carefully—"you should encounter any suspicious characters."

Shutting the door, Shepherd listened for a moment to the faint receding heel taps down the hall. Then he turned to the expectant looks set upon him.

"Cute, wasn't he?"

Peggy's eyes were alarmed blue pools. Lem opened his mouth, shut it, and went to the cognac. There was a silence.

"All right," in sudden impatience. "He might make things different, so I'll tell you what I'm up to."

Lem brought him another drink swiftly, his eyes happy and eager. "That's more like it!"

Looking down into the glass with a trace of embarrassment, Shepherd said, "It's a very simple thing, really. When it's actually closed up, we'll be in Shanghai. Ordinarily I wouldn't even charge for it—except we've got the shorts—bad." He looked at Peggy. "I guess you knew that when I had to clip your bouncing Czech for that bar bill."

"Man a m-mickle makes a m-muckle," she said cheerily. "But let's have another s-signal, the n-next time you want m-me to show a tails. That slap on the f-fanny was a little open, even f-for a joker like Mr. Taras."

Feeling her sympathy stretching toward him like hands, he answered sharply, "There won't be any next time that fifty bucks makes a difference. My end of the Cairo thing will be waiting in Shanghai. But in the meantime we have to get there." He paused, frowning, then went on with, "The Singapore stop, Louis Hai, came around wanting this favor. I had to ask him our ticket money from here for it."

"What is it, Shep?" from Lem. As Shepherd looked at him, he added quickly: "Maybe there's something I can do to help——"

"Sure, you can—by keeping your yapper shut!"

He turned to Peggy. "It might be a good idea, at that, for you to take Duphaine up on that audition. Call and ask him if he can do it tonight. I've a date I'd just as soon he wasn't tailing me on."

"With some local t-talent, no doubt."

"Yes, it's a woman. And I hope those wisecracks of yours don't get him to thinking who it might be."

"Well, who is s-she, O mighty man of m-mystery?"

"A woman who runs some kind of night spot over in the Cholon District. That's the Chinese suburb. Louis has some whisky," he explained. "The French tax on outside imports is too high for her to bring it in legitimately, so it'll have to be smuggled. But Louis wants to see her money before he hires a freighter and all. If she can show me cash on the barrelhead, I'll cable that she's good. Then he'll go ahead, and collect on delivery."

"Why, that's almost n-nothing at all!" Peggy cried. "It's almost h-honest!"

"Almost. Except that Louis's booze is a forgery of scotch labels and bottles, and what's inside would burn the fillings out of your teeth."

The delight left her face with her sigh. "There would have to b-be something wrong."

"What do we care?" Lem cut in. "We'll be away."

"We'd better be."

"And this Louis," Peggy asked, "he's going to s-send us enough for our f-fares if you just see this woman's money?"

"Well, he sort of had to." He began the half-sheepish, half-boastful grin she hated, the smart-alecky expression that accompanied stories of his exploits. "I knocked him all of a heap by telling him that I knew his stuff is phony." He stopped, so ready to laugh that she could have slapped him, and said, "Y'see, I was behind the guy who sold it to him."

Laughter drove Lem's head back. "Oh, that Shep!" he gasped. "Hell's own man!"

"Yes," Peggy said, unsmiling, "he c-certainly is."

But she was not heard. They were laughing now, Lem ecstatic at being back in confidence, his eyes lifted as to a god while Shepherd filled in the details of this new facet of his enterprises. She watched the darkly vital face above the tall immaculate whites kindle afresh with the light which Duphaine had

noted. And despite her feeling of being shut out, memory brought back the same shaking weakness she had experienced at the first sight of it, in Cairo.

The Kit-Kat during the last week of her engagement there, and a drink with Ben-Ali Henry, the tennis player, who a month later was to shoot himself when he lost his championship. Poor Benny, who knew that both his insurance business and his treasured acceptance by the café crowd would go with his cup, and who had preferred death to going back to being just another native boy. Benny, with his gossip and jokes, making her laugh . . . and then she had turned and seen him, lounging at a wall table in his assured, smart-barroom way.

He was looking at her, casual and arrogant, ordering her attention without making an open move toward it—enclosed in that untouchable place where he lived and into which she had not been able to break, that first night, or since. Even now she blushed, recalling how easy she had been for him—her pain and his surprise, and what had followed. Oh, she had taken to it naturally enough! No wonder he thought about her as he must—never saying what she had a right to hear, even when she was spilling out how she felt so fully that she frightened herself.

But the greatest cause for self-blame was her failure to run when she had learned the truth about him. The big truth—and not the one he had told her. Yes, give him credit; he had been honest enough about how he and his “valet” actually lived, and warning her away. Ha! He probably knew that he had her by then; that she would follow, and do what he wanted, as long as he liked. Well, that was the way she was, and though he might be wrong as a three-pound note, she was his. But still, where her moral sense had failed, her intelligence should have rescued her—from the very night she had seen him deliberately bring on that fight with the oilmen in Alexandria. There might have been hope even then: when she first had seen how he needed and used excitement like a drug—when she had recognized the obsession which had untracked him from his profession and sent him stealing through the East—when she finally knew that “the kick” was all he could truly care about, this thief ~~to whom~~ she had given all her love.

III

THE NIGHT was a descending curtain of blue ash. Beneath it the city had begun to stir like a sleeper from exhausting, figured dreams. Most of the Europeans were home now, stimulating themselves, their rich cars all but gone from the tamarind-lined streets. There were more rickshas—mostly those of Annamite prostitutes, with lanterns hung above their proud little heads to indicate that they had been called. The sidewalk cafés still maintained a scanty frieze of living decorations, casuals either too indolent to return to their private places or dreading to miss the feel of oncoming adventures uncoiling like a great snake in the surrounding jungle, near but not yet recognizable—

Shepherd paused. The automatic notes, product of what remained of a professional habit, faded from the soft tablet of his mind. Lighting a cigarette, he glanced back. Although he knew that Duphaine was safely on his way to the Casino with Peggy, he had thought it best to start from the hotel with a short walk. But the avenue seemed innocent of inquisitive followers, and he signaled a cruising taxi.

“Cholon.”

As the car left behind the city's formal buildings, and then its ruder environs, he saw that his rendezvous was to be farther away than he had supposed. The Chinese district clearly was a separate entity, rather than an incorporated quarter. The road to it paralleled the river. Riding lights from freight sampans swayed above the hot eyes of embankment huts. On the other side, the moon was caught in the stenciling of rice paddies. It was so quiet, so entranced with an old unconcern, that the abrupt racket of his destination startled him like blood thrown into his face.

Here were recognizably oriental streets—shrill with sound, illumination, and smelling to heaven. Long ago he had aban-

doned his Western notion of the Chinese as a gently philosophic fellow given to low-key attitudes and sepulchral observations on pious conduct. Rather he was as enduring as a bull whip—a schemer who worked and played and fought at the top of his voice. And if anyone shouted him down it must be the respected ruler of his roost, the wife.

Dismissing the taxi, he strolled for a time through the shrill, idiographed welter of bars, shops, and restaurants which opened on the narrow lanes. It was such a kaleidoscope—pervaded by the mingled odor of raw perfume, spices, cooking food, and sewage—that he found himself remembering a gray flat in Chicago's South Side . . . the relentless pick of his mother's voice at the newspaper which encircled his father, and an atlas over which he had bent, yearning desperately for those distant shapes in pink, green, red, purple, and yellow. . . .

Bijou's place appeared suddenly at the end of a thoroughfare more quiet than the rest, a large, maroon-lacquered pavilion with gold facings. He moved into the shadow of a doorway set flush with the street. For a few minutes he stood motionless, watching the way he had come, and the patrons—sporty Annamites and Chinese, almost solely—arriving beneath at the garish modern sign.

His care was almost habit; this whole project was so uninvolvement that he could have approached it openly. Some sort of report might have preceded his arrival, but he dismissed it. He would see this Bijou, check her ability to pay Louis, and they'd be able to get on. He thought pleasantly of the letter that would be waiting in Shanghai. Whistling softly, he left the doorway and went on to where the bright entrance stung the dusk with promise.

Inside, a small foyer gave on the café. Blatant with warring sounds, it was furnished with semicircular nests of booths converging upon a tiny dance floor. The physical resemblance to an American roadhouse was emphasized by, and ended with, a four-piece combination on a low platform. It was hammering out a tune for a swarm of yellow-faced men in identical white suits who marched their small partners around the floor like a

parade of automatons. "Tin Pan Alley," he murmured. "What you've done to the world!"

A Chinese in a tarnished tuxedo came from the main room, eyes passing over him like quick hands. "Bon soir, m'sieur."

"Do you speak English? My name is Shepherd. Bijou is expecting me."

"Of course, Mr. Shepherd," as he indicated a narrow flight of steps. Ascending them, Shepherd knocked on a door at the top. A voice inside said, "Come." He opened the door, and, entering, his breath paused in appreciative surprise.

The room, hung with neutral silk, was a frame for a woman who sat in splendor behind a low teakwood table. Her trappings—the brocaded gown, elaborate headdress, and heavy gold bracelets stacked on her forearms—were the routine gear of Eastern artifice, yet she carried them with such manner that they but emphasized an exquisite reserve. Her features were small and regular, except for the long tilted eyes which inspected him with such curious intentness. What he could see of her skin was like gold dust on snow. His gaze began to narrow.

"Good evening, Mr. Shepherd."

She brushed a small, square hand at a cushion in front of the table, smiling a little. "Won't you sit down? You are so tall my neck breaks to look at you."

Her teeth were clean. Eurasian, he thought. Crossing his ankles, he sank down on the cushion. She smiled again, more approvingly.

"You have been in the East for some time?"

"Long enough to be able to sit down without trouble. I also know how to handle sampans and chopsticks, if you'd like to know." His voice was cold, rough, and he noted it take the desired effect.

"Pardon my uncouth ways," he went on in the same tone, "but all this chi-chi"—he made a gesture that included both the room and her—"doesn't impress me." His fist dropped on the table with a thump. "I'm here for a business confab. So let's get on with it, and stop playing Mei Lang Fang."

Moving gracefully, she lifted the top from a quartz box.

As she took out a cigarette and lighted it without offering him one, a tremor of alarm traversed his neck. The action was so rude and composed that he knew it to be thoughtless. His abruptness had jarred her into—something. A moment later she lifted her eyes, and he saw that it was fear.

"Okay," he said quietly. "What's the form?"

"I haven't the money."

The words, so daintily precise, chopped at his heart. He thought of the Cathay Hotel in Shanghai—of Peggy putting on the low-cut dress that was to hold Duphaine in leash—of Lem patiently ironing his clothes.

"Too bad."

And it was thousands of miles to the nearest jewelry window through which they might throw a rock! A curse began to balloon in his chest.

"I had it all set—or thought I did—until the day before yesterday." She raised one of the stubby hands and restlessly let it fall. "I'll need more time."

"Then this wasn't your own deal?"

"How could I handle a shipment that size, alone?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

She glanced quickly at him, then rubbed out the cigarette. "Well, you can see that I haven't such a large place. No, it was for a—combine. But one of the main people dropped out on me, and took others with him."

As she added a soft, foul description Shepherd grimaced. It was doubly disappointing to see that regal display peel off and reveal just an ordinary port-joint proprietor.

"Where are you from, Bijou?"

She looked at him again, the painted lips still held rigid against her teeth. "Macao."

"You're attractive."

"You think so?"

"Well, don't you? You didn't get yourself all done up like this just to tell me that we can't do business. Did you think I might want to sleep with you, and tell Louis Hai that you have the money?"

She hesitated, then shrugged. "I've got most of it. By the time the stuff gets here, I should have the rest."

"And if you don't—rather than haul it back, Louis might take what you do have, is that it?"

"He'd probably make a big profit anyway. Is he a good friend of yours?"

"Good enough not to cross him up, at least at these prices."

Her eyes were curious. "He said you were a writer."

"That was quite a while ago."

"Even then I don't think you would."

"Maybe. I was more impressionable then."

"I doubt it. Men like you always get all the women they want," with a short, moody sigh. "Why couldn't you have been—easier?"

"Go ahead, keep talking. Maybe I'll sell Louis out yet."

"Yes," thoughtfully, "there's just a chance that you might, at that. Flattering your body is no use—you're jaded—so I'll try your mind," she said slowly. "I have something for it—something so rare that if there's any artist left in you, you'll tell that little lie to get it."

She had drawn her dignity back about her so gravely that he could believe she was not acting. "Yes?"

"It's a true secret—part of a civilization that was great when the so-called white races were still running around in animal skins. You have heard of the temple country around Angkor. See it, and you will know that our culture was as great as that of ancient Egypt, or of the Mayans—and considerably more than that brought us by the French!" Savagely, "Oppression, exploitation, and government-sold opium!"

"What's the secret? Up to now you sound like a tramp evangelist."

She gave him a flat look. "No—that part of it wouldn't get you. But what I have, believe me, is more concrete than the glory of my people." She hesitated, then: "How would you like a temple which the Ecole Française doesn't know about? You will discover it—write about it! Your book will be read by everyone! You will be rich and famous!"

She was straining forward now, her cheeks flushed, her careful posture broken up with eagerness. Shepherd held down his urge toward sarcasm as she coursed on with promises of a find unknown to the French archaeologists. “. . . and even more, you must remember that the Khmers were great workers in gold . . .”

His interest stirred briefly; then he shook his head.

“Pamphleteering is out of my line. I’ll still have to see your money before I can tell Louis it’s all right to ship.”

Watching the tenseness go out of her, the droop of her head, he said angrily: “So you don’t get some foreign hooch for those clowns downstairs! You’re still doing all right,” as he stood up. “I’m the one who’s some right to be sore, coming over here to waste my time!”

“Wait; I—I wasn’t being just—mercenary. I did hope you might write something about my country, from our point of view.”

She too rose, and he saw that she was taller than he had supposed, with bigger breasts. “Do you mind my asking?—but you say ‘my country.’ You’re Annamite?”

“Yes—completely. Even though I had a French father.” A curious, mutinous despair flickered from between her lashes. Then her face hardened. “All right, you great big handsome white man! Go ahead and feel sorry for me! Yes, I’m just another half-caste who hates it! Hates——”

Leaning down, he stopped the quick jet of tortured words with his mouth. When he released her, he said: “If you’re half Annamite and half French you’re less mixed up than I am, Bijou. If anybody’d trace back my bloodlines—and I don’t know who’d care to—he’d turn up a whole UNO.”

There was a silence, then she asked: “Will you do me a favor?”

“Probably not.”

“Will you think over being—the man you were?”

“He was slow with a lie too.”

“But wouldn’t he have recognized what great good can come of a small white one, at times?”

He turned to the door. "Dig up the money, and I'll send the word to Louis. Otherwise, no dice."

"Don't go."

"Have to—you've sort of fouled up my plans."

"You'll come back?"

"Do you think you still might be able to raise it?"

"I—don't know."

"Well, I'll let it ride for a couple days. If you get straightened out, let me know."

"Where are you going now?"

"What's it to you?"

"If it's the Casino, you can come in my car."

"What about us showing up together? Unless you know now that you can't pay Louis."

"I'll drop you a bit away."

"Thanks, but I better not. There's a girl who might see us and get funny ideas."

"And about you she has reason to, no?"

"No."

"Is she beautiful?"

"She suits me."

"Is she good in bed?"

"Good night."

"Only au revoir. I'll see you at the Casino—after my number."

"Oh—you work there?"

"As you said, I'm doing all right here with this place—but not well enough. So I dance for the rich white trash."

"Then—those are your show clothes?"

"You really didn't think, did you, that I'd get all dressed up like this for an author?"

He looked at her admiringly. "Play them as they come, don't you?" Opening the door, he said, "Call me, if you patch up your team," and went out.

On the landing he paused, his face sobering. They were stuck—stuck deep. He thought of Peggy again, and this time only of Peggy. Going down the stairs, he ruminated: "Am I in love with that little tomato?"

The Chinese in the worn dinner jacket opened the door for him. "Your visit with Madame was satisfactory?"

"Who are you?"

"Joe, the manager here. I have her confidence."

"If that's true, you'd know how it went without asking. So you're a liar and a snoop. Go up and confide that in her."

The man's face did not change. "So she doesn't have the money."

"Good night, Joe. Don't find yourself in a gunny sack."

"Not Joe. You will learn. Perhaps to your profit."

Shepherd hesitated. "When you get something, I'll listen."

"And until then, we have not spoken?"

"Have we?"

Joe revealed a swath of gold-laced teeth. "I will get you a cab." He went out into the street, yelling and snapping his fingers.

IV

RICH white trash, she had said. . . .

The Casino stood in its own dusty park, a plaster Regency pile as graceless inside as its cracking exterior. No strident noise nor color mixtures disturbed this center of the haute monde of the planters and military, the bureaucrats and business elite of the colony. In its tall rooms the homeland did not seem so wretchedly far away; indeed, the exiles might have fancied themselves back in the Boulevard Haussmann, if each did not know that the other gamblers were simply fellow timeservers. From the bar Shepherd watched the prisoner-rulers and their women moving around the tables. Did any of them consider, he wondered, that they might drown in the native sweat represented by those quietly accepted gains and losses?

Thus far he had caught no sight of Peggy or Duphaine. Could the detective have foxed him—started out with Peggy, deserted

her, and been secretly behind him on his visit to Cholon? Well, small matter now; Bijou's financial condition made it safe to know her, for all the police in Indo-China.

His gaze casually roved the room, searching for another prospect. There were the games, of course, a key which he had small wish to try. He had only a few thousand francs, and scared money seldom wins. Yet there was no solution in activity. Putting down his glass, he went out into the main room.

"Messieurs et mesdames! Faites vos jeux!"

The roulette layouts were deeply hedged with players. He stopped at one as the croupier turned the wheel. "Rien n'va plus!" The ball spun, rattled over the slots, and dropped. "Dix-huit, rouge, pair et passe!" The rake reached out hungrily for the house. "Messieurs et mesdames! Faites vos jeux!"

He moved on. Roulette was too impersonal in its purely mechanical chance to interest him; but at a party of chemin de fer he stopped, his attention quickening on a man at the oblong baize-covered table. Black eyes shone like cloves in a steak-red face. His neck and shoulders were massive, with ropes of muscle moving in tight sleeves. Roars broke from his purple lips as the turn of the cards switched his mood from rage when he banded and lost to pleasure when he suived and gained the deal—a violent child, at once comic and brutal, amid a group of dominated adults. Reaching out a pair of strangler's hands, he took the shoe.

"Une banque de cent piastres, mes enfants!"

A spidery woman on his right called, "Banco!" and he slid a card from beneath the metal clip. With the same powerfully controlled jerks he drew to himself, another for the punter, and then to himself again.

The woman picked up her hand. "Carte."

Turning over his cards, the dealer showed a queen and six, for a safe six; then contemptuously passed the requested card—a trey.

Without hesitation he drew to his hand. "Huit à la banque!" as he pulled a deuce and won over the seven which his opponent sourly revealed.

Behind Shepherd a voice murmured, "Faux tirage," with the resentment of an orthodox player for one who upsets a legitimate rotation of the cards. "Savery, cette vache!"

Shepherd examined the man more closely. A drug user? That might explain his splashy confidence; but if true, one who could be jockeyed into pushing luck too far—

Drawing back from the table, he went to the chef de partie and bought plaques with all the notes his wallet contained. As he returned to his place Savery, again victorious, was crying, "Une banque de quatre cent piastres!" Two players split the wager, and he dealt again. The punter asked for a card. Picking up his hand, Savery glanced at it, threw it ecstatically down. "Neuf!"

The croupier's trowel scooped up the lost counters and used cards. Swiftly making change, he deducted the house fee and added the fresh winnings to a mound before the grinning banker.

"Une banque de huit cent piastres! Qui fait la banque?"

"Banco," said Shepherd.

Savery looked toward the alien accent. "Ah, a stranger. English?"

"American. And you?"

A surge of blood swung so harshly up from the bulging collar that his heavy eyelids seemed to shake from it. "French. Perhaps you thought otherwise?"

Shepherd put down his plaques. "It's your deal I'm curious about—not your nationality. Cards, please."

Savery held his stare, as if even more stunned than angered by the unexpected impudence. Then, the big hairy paws trembling, he dealt.

Taking his cards, Shepherd found that he had an ace and four. "Card, if you don't mind," in the same mocking tone.

Savery revealed a king and six, and spun an ace to Shepherd. His breath quickened; the dealer now had only to stand to tie. But if his calculated rudeness had been sufficient to irk him into doing as no legitimate player would . . .

Pushing another card from the box, Savery flipped it over.

There was a sudden drop at the base of Shepherd's stomach as he saw that it was a three—for nine and the pot.

"Neuf à la banque," the croupier droned. Another muted protest at the false draw came from the spectators, but this time Savery's reaction was one neither of exuberant noise nor of broad gesticulations. Across the table his eyes were as cold as previously they had been lively.

"I let it ride," he said, carefully and with little accent. "Sixteen hundred piastres. Do you suivre?"

No addict, Shepherd thought; just a real gambler. Humiliation grinding beneath his semblance of ease, he shook his head. The croupier's blade, in shoveling up his counters, had stripped him so completely that three hundred-odd dollars might be a million. He lighted a cigarette, fully conscious of the disdainful glance awarded him before it turned to the rest of the circle.

"Une banque de seize cent piastres. Qui dit banco?"

There was no single taker, and the croupier again opened the wager for a general split.

Then Shepherd saw the woman who had come to stand behind Savery's chair. Tall, encased in satin, her slender figure offered a total impression of strong and nervous chic. Her hair lay brown wings above a broad forehead scored with a small frown. She wore no jewels other than a string of pearls at cool variance to a brightly outlined mouth. Her nose was straight and exquisitely carved at the tip, but her most arresting feature was her eyes. In a thicket of untouched lashes they were regarding him like a pair of quizzical, gray half dollars.

She placed a hand on Savery's shoulder. He gave her a non-committal greeting before returning his attention to the miscellany of bets which almost equaled the amount of his wager. "Je complete," said the spidery woman, to absorb the final fifty piastres of the hazard. He dealt again, with the same cold poise; but now his joy in contest seemed to have gone with his raucous glee. He drew quietly, and saw his bank go down without physical or vocal comment.

"Baccarat!" sounded the croupier's voice above the happy cries of the winners. Savery passed the shoe and sat drumming

his fingers against the edge of the table. To Shepherd it seemed as if he were pondering how the luck of the deal so abruptly had gone from the box—as if he were thinking that the woman's touch had broken his run. Then he shrugged and stood up.

His arrogant body was set on a pair of legs so short that the crinkly cap of hair came only to the woman's chin. Catching Shepherd's look of surprise, the button eyes jerked away. When they almost at once changed from baleful to sharply interested, Shepherd's attention followed.

The far end of the gaming room had been extended into a recess for dining and dancing. Peggy was on a dais in one corner, a trio of musicians behind her, demanding recognition with a cheerful smile.

There was a flourish of strings and she began to sing, her voice whispering over the pale panorama of faces.

"In Dublin's fair city, where the girls are so pretty——"

He saw Duphaine standing at the entrance to the alcove with a portly, managerial-looking man whom he judged to be Dracot. So that was where she had been; off somewhere with the cop and the proprietor, arranging this audition.

"'Twas there I first met with sweet Molly Malone."

Both rooms had silenced, as though from a command. In a dress cut so low that there was an electrifying moment of suspense with every breath she took, she presented such a feast of downright girl that her audience—worn by worry, homesickness, and the everlasting wet heat—clearly was yielding to the combined operation of her small song and sheer, lush vitality. Noting how play had stopped at the tables, Shepherd thought, "She's no entertainer for a gambling house!"

"She drove a wheelbarrow through streets broad and narrow——"

As he watched her a disquietude as uncharacteristic as the caress he had given Lem began to nag him. Approaching forty—and jaded, as Bijou had said. What right had he to be yanking

a marvel like that around his shoddy world, denying her the security that all women wanted and needed?

“Crying, ‘Cockles and muscles, alive, all alive!’ ”

Alive, yes, spellbindingly so, with the talent and physical equipment for certain professional success—while he, keeping her from it, had all the future of a blind man running down a blind alley.

She concluded to a burst of handclaps shot through with cries of “Encore! Encore!” Smiling but shaking her head in little gestures of stingless refusal, Peggy stepped down from the platform and crossed to Duphaine and the delight-wreathed Dracot. Modest yet assured, she passed through the foam of plaudits as though they were her natural due. “And a show-man too,” he thought.

He heard the spidery woman annoyedly offer “Une banque de cinquante piastres!” Turning back to the table, he saw that Savery had left his place and was hurrying quickly and purposefully toward the alcove. His companion’s teeth were holding the inner edge of her lower lip.

He wondered, moving toward the exit, what she would answer if he had told her that no matter how hopeful her escort might be, or how the object of his admiration looked, he was probably on his way to having his eye spit in.

There was a light touch on his arm. He stopped, looking around.

“I beg your pardon,” she said in a clear, projected voice. “My name is Alix Savery.”

“Jack Shepherd.”

“I should like to talk to you, Mr. Shepherd. I must join my husband now, but may I ask where you’re staying?”

“The Continental.”

“Thank you. I’ll ring in the morning.”

With a slight nod she went quickly to where, he saw, Dracot was introducing Savery to Peggy. Even at this distance he could see that the profile of Hyacinthe Duphaine, beside them, was tight with reserve.

"She is your girl—that blond tart?" Bijou was staring up at him, her smile hard and unamused, her attire as startling amid this formal décor as a Toulouse-Lautrec poster on a church wall.

"You've a nice set of teeth. Don't you want to keep them?"

The same fury he had seen in her office flickered from the long eyes. "I wouldn't think you were a man whose girl would have to work."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Don't let her take my job, Mr. Shepherd," she said, fright and despair suddenly in her voice. "I—need it too much."

"What makes you think she will?"

"You saw what she did to these lechers," hopelessly. "And with Paul Savery asking to meet her, what do you think Dracot will do?"

"Who's Paul Savery?"

She regarded him uncertainly. "Ask his wife. You just spoke to her."

"She to me—a mistake. She wanted to know if I'm a Mr. Carter from Hong Kong."

"Merde! The next time she sees you she will bow, and soon after—oh, I know these nice women!"

"What's eating you now? Was it her husband who dropped out of your combine?"

"No! No!" in quick alarm. "He is a big businessman—very important and respected. Why would he be in anything like that?"

"A few easy piastres, maybe."

"No, no!" she repeated emphatically. "He is too rich already. He could cause me great trouble if he ever thought I should say such a thing."

"I was only asking. I'm a stranger in town, y'know."

"And so is your—young lady. Strange and beautiful. She can have the job here, if you let her."

"It's for her to say," he told her shortly. "And remember—she doesn't have a spot over in Cholon on the side."

"But it's only money to her! To me it's——" She broke off, pushing her fingers together desperately.

"What?"

"It's—important for me to keep this job. It—gives me publicity for my place."

"For a half-caste you don't lie very well."

The trick of insult worked again; her anger kindled and almost spoke. But just before it revealed her mind she caught back the words at her lips and stared up at him with perfect venom. "This is a bad country for enemies, Mr. Shepherd."

Then she was walking away, as from a chat with a pleasant patron, toward the entertainers' platform. But when she neared the portal of the inner room he saw Dracot frown and shake his head, and pantomime that Peggy was going to sing again.

V

THE TELEPHONE rang shortly before noon. Shepherd leaped toward it, involuntarily eager. He had spent a chain-smoking morning prowling around the suite, waiting for Alix Savery's call, with anticipation, he realized, when he heard Peggy's voice. Lazy and hoarse, it scarcely stammered.

"Hi! How about giving a girl some breakfast?"

"You sound like you're still in bed."

"I am, if that's anything to be h-huffy about. Say when, and I'll be ready—also w-willing and able. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I was expecting someone else, that's all."

"Oh! The one you m-met last night, huh?" He could feel her trying to keep the query light. "Wasted no t-time, did you?"

"No, not she—somebody else. And stop pouting!"

"I'm not. I just w-wanted to be with you." She paused, before saying, "I wish I was n-now."

"What'd you do, wake up with a hangover?"

"You are a l-louse! A really and truly one." Then her tone brightened. "But I d-did have a good time last night at the

C-Casino. I sang and Dracot—that's the b-boss—wants to hire me."

"I suppose Paul Savery helped that along."

She gave a little gasp of surprise. "How'd you know?"

"Never mind."

"Were you there? You w-were! Why didn't you l-let me know?"

"You were too busy." He hesitated. "What about the job?"

"Well, I s-sort of agreed I would—after what you said about the money. I m-mean," she went on hastily, "it might be sort of f-fun, too. . . . Come on down, Shep."

"Later. Go back to sleep and get pretty."

"But I haven't listened to your heart for so long."

"Please, honey—I'll see you for cocktails. Go to sleep again, or practice winking, or something."

"A r-really and truly one," she repeated, and cut off.

He put the receiver back on the hook, thinking about her face flushed and crumpled with sleep, perhaps getting angry with him for denying her great pleasure of curling up on him, and of how attentive other men were.

The telephone sounded again. This time he was certain it would be Alix Savery's call, and he let it ring a second and third time before answering.

"Mr. Shepherd, this is——"

"I know."

"I'm in the lobby. If you're alone, I'd like to come to your apartment."

"Of course—5C."

"Thank you."

He waited with increasing wonder. Her readiness to come to the rooms of a stranger—so unusual in a continental woman—gave heightened promise to the meeting. Her whole approach had been so singularly free of coyness that he was sure her aim was not that of Bijou's scornful description. He had a sudden, encouraging notion that money was not far away.

Leaving the door ajar, he said, "Come in," as soon as there

was a tap on it. She entered and closed it behind her, swiftly yet without haste.

"Bonjour, madame. It's nice to see you again." It appeared that she was controlling an immense nervousness, as if, now that she was actually here, she was doubting the impulse which had brought her. Murmuring her thanks, she seated herself in a chair a bit removed from the others and looked at him with the same slight, speculative frown which she had used the night before. He laughed.

The frown deepened. "M'sieur?"

"I'm sorry—but to see a lady's upbringing suddenly rise to haunt her. Believe me, you are as safe here as if we had met downstairs."

A light surprise, followed by an almost condescending note of amusement, came into her eyes. She shook her head. "I wasn't considering my honor, Mr. Shepherd—charming of you though it is to think so. And indeed it is, as you say, safer for me to see you here than in the public rooms."

She touched the words "honor" and "safer" with such delicate irony that Shepherd had a reaction of uneasy surprise. If she had been one of the personalities with whom he customarily dealt, he knew it would have been time for him to make a move toward commanding the situation; but he decided that such tactics were useless with Alix Savery.

He held up his hands, fingers outspread, and said, "All thumbs," with an unfelt smile. Sitting down on the divan, he leaned back, patiently hoping to force her to the next move. She stared at her shoes as though unaware of either him or his intention.

In the checkered light and shadow of the room she was even lovelier than she had been at the Casino. She wore a tailored pongee suit stitched with designs in heavy gray silk. The pattern was repeated in her hat, an emphasis which further developed the wide, tranquil stain of her eyes. Her face was either free of make-up or it had been handled skillfully, for the tanned skin glowed with what appeared to be unaided health. Across it slashed the contrasting and openly artificial bloom of her

mouth. For a Frenchwoman, her legs were superlative. She smiled and he saw that her teeth were large and occasionally uneven, but beautifully kept.

He was silent until she asked, "Do you mind if I ask a most personal question?"

"Yes, but go ahead."

"I was watching you last night when you lost to my husband. . . ." She hesitated, then shrugged her wide shoulders. "I might as well be abrupt. Did that money mean a great deal to you?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't much."

"You heard me."

She put her finger tips up to her mouth, tapping them together and blowing on them. "I thought so," she said in the same grave voice. "There was just a tiny crack in that monumental reserve of yours. I saw it once before, at the Travellers when a good gambler was cleaned out."

"You saw it again for the same reason."

She took no open pride in his admission, and he saw that from the first she had been certain of her judgment. "That's why I have approached you."

"Approach closer." He heard his little joke sound sharply irritable. The money sense was increasing, but he did not like what was coming with it—that she so easily had considered and decided that she should use him.

She continued as if she had not heard: "You are frank—a compliment that I shall return. Not, of course, that it would avail you anything to repeat what I am about to say. No one would believe you."

"Well, that's as good a basis for a confidence as any."

"Isn't it? So altogether I have small fear in telling you that I wish to leave my husband."

He leaned forward, attentive and encouraging. "Yes?"

"To do so I must have help. Perhaps you know that French wives have no passports of their own—only a page in their husbands'?"

"I see. You need a—maker of arrangements."

She nodded. "Someone who discreetly can obtain a car and see that I get across the border into Thailand, incognito."

"And from there?"

"Bangkok will do for the first step. I don't think much could be done beyond there, from here"—her shoulders again lifted slightly—"without attracting his attention. And perhaps," she added with a slight grimace, "not from here."

"I take it Savery isn't exactly anxious you should leave."

"He has said that he would kill me if I ever tried it. Of course he would do the same to anyone who helped me."

"I don't scare easy, milady."

"Milady." She used his word gently, twisting his mocking inflection from it. "I wonder if you think it is a lady who comes to you like this, for such a purpose?"

"Why should you care what I think? If I go along, I'll give you the full treatment. But let me say I wouldn't work any harder for a lady in distress than I might for whomever bothers her. It just depends on who gets to me first—with something to make it worth my while."

"Then you will—go along with me?"

"That depends."

She smiled. "But I did get here before Paul, didn't I?"

"Oh, you think he might show up too?"

"No, I don't think he'd need your help, efficient though I've an idea it is."

"Offhand, I'd say that idea is why you're here."

"It is."

He was liking her now, and as he saw her preparing to go had a twinge of regret as for someone whose departure would leave an unwanted space.

"I've given you enough to think about for now," she said. "I will call you the morning of day after tomorrow. That will give time for your man to make inquiries about a car."

"How did you know about Lem?"

Her smile deepened. "Perhaps I didn't come here as unknowing as you might think."

"That's a relief. I was beginning to feel like a crystal ball. You've had me—looked over?"

"We'll go into that another time. I'm due at the hairdresser's now, and that can't wait, even for your curiosity."

Opening a snakeskin purse, she took out a jeweled brooch and handed it to him. "Meanwhile, here's a retainer of faith."

He held it up between two fingers, inspecting it. "Just the thing for my little black dress."

"French husbands are rather peculiar, Mr. Shepherd. Jewels, furs, clothes may not give them too much pause—but money—well, they are convinced that for a wife it can be the source of all evil."

"Smart fellows." He tossed the brooch on his palm. "But to be crass—there's more where this came from?"

"Yes," she answered in a cooling voice.

"And it's up to me to transmute it? These pawnshops here are government-owned, aren't they? M'sieur Savery might be informed."

But once more she had anticipated him. "I'll not know I—lost it." She handed him a slip of paper. "Here's the address of a man in Cholon who will handle it."

"Not a regular pawnbroker?"

She shook her head almost impatiently. "An art dealer. I learned about him from a friend of mine—another wife with a—shall I say, close husband? Tuey Fung is most discreet. He will not give you what it is worth, but it should be enough to get things started."

She paused at the door, and all at once her surface manner cracked. Stretching out her hand as though for support, she gave him a look of such honest, imploring distress, whispering, "You must get me away," that he took the light fingers and pressed them reassuringly.

"You're practically shopping in a Bangkok bazaar right now."

"Bless you—"

She went out quickly. He looked at the brooch again and called Lem's room.

When he got down to the front of the hotel the little man

was waiting. Shepherd passed him without speaking and walked on to the corner. Turning it, he stopped and lighted a cigarette. As Lem appeared he indicated a taxi against the curb.

"Tell him to drive us around for a while."

The streets were idle beneath the noonday heat, a patina of European culture over a native metabolism threatening to burst through and swamp it in an efflorescence compounded of health and sorrow. Hotels which might have been transplanted without surprise to the Champs Elysée. Rickshas and Isotta Fraschinis. White faces above stiff white clothes, a tired defiance in them, as if raised by will above the encompassing waxy yellow ones in soft colored silk.

Writer! He tossed his cigarette out the window. "The Pearl of the East—the Little Paris. How do you like it?"

"It's a fake."

"It's got sidewalk cafés, cops with paper clubs, and gingerbread architecture. You'd better settle for them, hadn't you? They're as close to home as you're apt to get."

Spots of color appeared faintly in Lem's pale cheeks.

"Will we be here long?"

"I don't expect so."

"And after Shanghai?"

"I'll decide from there."

"Perhaps—we could start back?"

"Got any ideas?"

The little man hesitated. "It's just French enough here to remind me and—well, my trouble was a long time ago. Sometimes they do forget."

"The Sûreté? That's not what I hear."

As an expression of desolate acknowledgment came over the tight, aging face, he saw that another exile had only been whistling in an unbeatable wind. "We'll see," he said, frowning. "Maybe Spain. There's a way over the mountains from Barcelona. We might look into it, if you want to take the chance."

"It'd be enough to walk through Montmartre just one night, Shep. I guess I must be getting on."

"Then I must be still a nipper. I don't care much about meandering through the Loop."

"Americans are different. Or at least you. It's like you weren't born anyplace."

"I wasn't," sarcastically. "I just appeared one day, with a virgin set of fingerprints."

"There," with a sigh. "How is the feeling for home to be explained to such a one?"

"Now you! From Peggy that tune's bad enough, but to hear you singing it!"

"She's had enough of it over here?"

"Oh, you know women—they're just not suited to knocking around. But what would I do if I did go back? Find myself humped over a rewrite desk, if I was lucky. And what would I do about you, will you tell me?"

"But perhaps I also could get a job. I wouldn't care what it was—just so long as we'd still be together."

"Sure, you might get a job. As a waiter, say. And the first night you'd be lifting the best patron's watch."

"No, I wouldn't, Shep—on my honor, I wouldn't. I wouldn't touch a thing anyplace until you said I could!"

Shepherd laughed, and put his hand on the bony shoulder. "Knock it off, Lem. If we go Stateside it'll be first class—top chop, and not before. It's no good there without money. For a man, anyhow," he added after a moment.

"You mean it wouldn't be so hard for Peggy?"

"Well, she's got everything else."

"Then maybe she should!" in quick eagerness. "With all that shape—and her voice isn't so bad, either—she should be where the big pay-off is! Why don't you——"

"Tell this guy to take us over to Cholon."

V I

SHE WAS almost happy. Physically she felt as she liked to feel: a little tired from too-much rest, her hair clean, comfortable and fresh in her clothes, and knowing that her skin was at its

best, scrubbed yet creamy. As she talked, from across the table Paul Savery's expression reinforced her surety of how well she looked, a certainty added to by a fringe of men who, to watch her with discreet lust, had taken places near by on the terrace. She knew that she was an oddity here in this worn city, and she continued the small show of gaiety and vivacious preenings with which she had been acknowledging their hunger. Now if Shep were only here—

But no! He never had given her the careful attention which marked Savery's tribute—never! He either teased her, was short with her, or just plain didn't listen. Still, it was too bad that he wasn't here to see her being appreciated in this fulsome way.

"... a f-farm on Manitoba, in Canada, where my f-family still lives. Like all g-girls, I guess, I'd always wanted to b-be on the stage, and f-finally they let me go to Winnipeg for s-singing and dancing lessons. They never r-really liked the idea, though, and if it h-hadn't been for the war I suppose they'd eventually have got me to come home and m-marry one of the local b-boys."

"But you didn't?" Savery asked.

A trace of frown moved briefly across her face. "No, I was in England, v-visiting my father's s-sister in Devon, when it started. They b-began to recruit for ENSA—that's the—d-do you know?—entertainment units f-for the British t-troops—and I was able to j-join up."

"It must have been quite an experience."

"It was w-wonderful! Will Weems, the music-hall c-comedian, was our star, and the r-rest of the troupe was pretty good t-too. We played all over the Mediterranean Theater—of w-war, I mean—and the Middle East. All those b-boys . . . I guess nobody in show business ever h-had audiences like them."

"And there was not one, of so many soldiers, that you liked better than the rest?"

"Oh, there wasn't much t-time for that. One place today and g-gone tomorrow. Besides, the officers kept so much brass around us that after a while the g-girls made a p-pact not to date anybody at all unless we had t-to."

"Vows of chastity for so many lovely little girls—what a pity."

"There were only s-six of us. Of course it w-was different in C-Cairo——"

"Cairo? Ah yes, it well could have been different there."

"That was where they sent a lot of us after our tours were finished," she went on quickly. "To keep from being drafted into war plants, we had to be out of England. Cairo was a sort of pool where we could rest until they needed us again, for new units."

"And in Cairo—you did not enforce the same restrictions upon yourselves?"

The shadow came more definitely upon her expression, in part for the prying, implying little questions, but more for what the sound of Cairo's name always brought her—a realization of how somewhere in its maze of luxury and filth, its raucous bazaars, brown-reeded Nile and incandescent night life, she had lost the way back to Manitoba.

"It was interesting," she said, looking out into the sun-struck avenue. "So much so that when they stopped the big shooting I didn't feel like going home, and got permission to be released there. I thought that with the Orient so close I at least should see it. So here I am," she finished with a half laugh, "on my way to Sh-Shanghai."

"You have an engagement there?"

She nodded, flushing. "I t-think it's c-called the C-Canidrome." As she heard herself begin to stammer more, her ease vanishing before her ineptitude with lies, she knew helplessly that in another moment she would be red as a beet.

Savery's regard took on a note of puzzlement. "I did not know that the Canidrome had resumed, but perhaps so."

"I th-think that's the n-name."

"I used to know Shanghai with some completeness," he said easily. "I am sure that you will be a great success there."

"I h-hear it's v-very colorful."

"Very. However, if you are not too anxious to reach it—that is, if your contract does not call for a definite date—perhaps you might consider an engagement here at the Casino? Last night I could see Dracot was most interested."

"Well, it's t-two weeks before my boat . . . It would be a g-good way to f-fill in the time."

"I am sure that it can be arranged without difficulty. Perhaps you will permit me to add my enthusiasm to Dracot's? We are old friends."

"Why, that would b-be so n-nice——"

"The word for Shepherd."

She looked up from beneath the wide brim of her hat. He was looming over the table, grinning down at her like a huge pixy with a talent for trouble. "Wh-why, h-hello," she managed to say. "T-this is Mr. Sh-Sh-Sh——"

"Shepherd." Not offering to shake hands, he sat down in the third chair at the table. "We have met before, in a playful way."

"Ah yes," Savery said quietly. "The American of last evening."

"You should remember. But I have no hard feelings. In fact, I'm ready to buy a drink."

"M-maybe we sh-should m-match for it," Peggy said coldly. "I met Mr. Shepherd in Cairo," she told Savery, "and again c-coming here. I th-think he is a little cr-crazy."

Savery's eyes, inspecting him behind a tiny smile, were hard as marbles—and again feeling the good opponent opposite him, the experienced blade, Shepherd laughed out of an increasing happiness. "That's no more than a simile, I'm afraid. Readers of our fiction would recognize it as one of the trappings of the so-called Fighting Romance. The lady's sharpness is designed to mask how mad she is about her victim."

"Ah?" Savery's gaze came to a fix on Peggy's mouth. "And this lady is—mad in such a way?"

"H-he said it was a f-fiction idea," Peggy snapped, her color deepening another shade. "Mr. Sh-Sh-Sh——"

"Shepherd."

"—Shepherd," with a venomous glare, "is a writer. Or so he s-says."

"I fear that I too must accept his word for it." Savery moved his dark eyes to Shepherd. "Your pseudonym is unfamiliar to me."

"I don't use a pen name—but, for better or worse, my own. Dare say that's unique in this part of the world." Noting a fractional flicker of the heavy lids, he added: "Your Inspector Duphaine is one of my readers. He called to tell me so."

"Ah yes, I have heard that he is—bookish."

Shepherd turned to beckon a waiter, his mind racing over the signal of quick concern, as quickly controlled, which had crossed the Frenchman's forehead as he mentioned his police connection. He felt himself tightening up expectantly. Savery sober obviously was a better man than Savery in wine—yet drunk he had been a fast, smart, powerful bully with faith in his luck; an anthology of tough adversaries. He sat still, feeling his blood start up at the prospect of a clash, tasting promise.

"I know that you will forgive me that I must leave." Savery had his wallet out and was handing a waiter a bill. Standing, he bowed to Peggy. "I will come for you tomorrow afternoon, then?"

"I'd l-love it."

"Such a wonderful word for such a poor exhibition of horse racing. I must read your works, Mr. Shepherd," he said with a nod, and started off.

"Better stick to baccarat. You'll find it easier."

Savery paused, looking back with a flat smile. "You should know." With a slight flick of his hand he turned and went down the steps to a waiting car.

Her full lower lip thinning out in a derisive line, Peggy said, "That s-sounded as if he were t-telling you, d-darling." Then suddenly her smile faded. "You played l-last night—and you c-can't afford it, b-broke as we are."

He drew a bundle of notes from the pocket of his jacket. "Who says we are?"

"You w-won all that!"

"In a way. Of course there's a little service that goes with it. but it looks as if we'll make Shanghai all right."

"Wh-what s-service?" suspiciously.

"Nothing for you to worry about. What's this about the race track?"

"Is it s-something—d-dangerous?"

"So he's making a grab for you, is he?"

"When he asked m-me to go with him and his w-wife? Don't be f-foolish!"

"Then which one is it who's interested?"

"You're d-disgusting! Can't anybody be interested in m-me—c-can't they?—without you th-thinking something b-bad? Mr. Savery can help me get a j-job at the Casino—or would have, if you haven't m-messed it up. Why d-do you have to act like th-that? He was only being f-friendly."

"We don't need his friendship, honey. You won't have to sing for your supper."

"Maybe I w-want to! Did you ever th-think of that? No! J-just come b-busting in here and act like I b-belong to you, you b-b-big——"

"Well, don't you?"

"N-no, I don't!" She jumped up so suddenly that her chair fell over with a rude clatter into the murmurous hush. Turning, she ran, through a gamut of admiring glances from the men at the clustered tables, into the hotel. Envy touched their faces as he hurried after her.

In the lobby, she was just disappearing into the lift. He began to sprint up the shallow steps of the stair well. She had reached her room when she heard his running feet on the tiles. Looking down the hall, she gave a panicky yelp and leaped inside, but he caught the handle just as the bolt was beginning to slide between them, and came in after her so violently that the flung door pushed her backward a few quick teetering steps.

"Y-you k-keep away f-from m-me!" Snatching up a glass ash tray, her arm was halfway up before, with one connected movement, he shut the door and caught her. "St-top! Y-you leave m-me al——"

Her protest broke off into unintelligible cries of angry desperation as he crushed her back on the bed. She fought viciously, but his full weight was on her.

His free hand broke the light elastic around her waist. A screech of tearing silk echoed the moan which sounded behind

her clenched teeth. As he took her, savagely, out of a need which only brutality could express, she held herself rigid until the fight began to seep out of her, replaced by the almost unendurable ecstasy which had betrayed her, months before. Above the hate for them both which hammered like a gong in her ears, she could hear herself start to whimper with pleasure, and then sob aloud. Yet when she was sliding back down the ecstatic hill, all frenzy spent, the knowing that he could do this to her and make her enjoy it left only the fury behind, echoing as though in a vacuum. . . .

He got up, his chest pumping like a bellows, pulling his clothes together. Reaching past her for a box of cigarettes on a bedside table, he saw that she was staring up at the ceiling, tears dribbling from the corners of her wide-open eyes.

"I g-guess you're p-pretty proud of yourself—"

The split and crumpled dress only partially covered the majestic breasts, the small waist above the white arc of her thighs; but despite the lavish evidence of just those few minutes before, she looked so like a beaten and chagrined child that he stopped where he stood.

"That's all y-you care a-about me—"

Looking down at her, he could feel dismay begin to move over him monumentally as a glacier, the amazement of amazements to the sophisticated mind when a cliché proves to hold the essence of superior truth.

"—not m-me at all—"

Great God—it was happening to him! How often had he heard the only words which in this time of clarity there were to describe her—from maudlin drunks, stunned lovers, appreciative and sentimental husbands with snapshots—"The greatest little girl in the whole world . . ."

For that, he saw like a light switched on in a darkened room, was all that he could say or know. Here she was, the opposite number who would be beside him, warm and solid with sympathetic life, no matter what. Let him be blinded, crippled in body or mind, there she would remain—his own particular Everyman's Good Woman. . . . And let her die—even if that

shining fund of flesh had dissolved, he still would feel her there; if those cornflower eyes were but dry sockets, they would shine and twinkle their message; if her wide mouth became no more than viscid rubble, it would offer the kisses of reassuring passion. Yes, if she were dead, so called, there yet would endure all those flimsy tokens of a love which a great girl can bestow upon a lucky man who, if he were twice lucky, could appreciate the magnitude of her gift.

He dropped on his knees—awkwardly, because he never had done it before—and pressed his face against her, muttering so that she could scarcely hear him:

"Forgive me, Peg. Most of all I was the way I was downstairs—and this, too, I guess—because . . . because . . ."

He was silent, and after a minute she asked up at the ceiling, "B-because why?"

"Because I—don't want you to get away from me. I don't, Peg——"

"You d-don't?" cautiously. "You r-really d-don't?"

"You ought to, you know. But, Peggy baby——"

Suddenly she rolled over toward him, her arms flashing out to draw the hard, bent head into the rich orbit of her womanliness. She felt him press closer, as though comforted from fear, and her hold tightened. Gratefulness swung up within her like a warm fountain. At last the barricade was down and she was in where he lived—holding the blessed knowledge that he was content to be with her alone. Anyway, for here and now . . .

She did not stammer, saying: "Go and lock the door."

VII

STATEMENT made May 15, 1947, at Hanoi by M. Emile Bollaert, French High Commissioner of Indo-China:

I want to make one statement at the outset because everything else hinges upon it: France will remain in Indo-China, and Indo-

China within the French Union. This is the first principle of our policy and it would be prejudicial to the interests of peace if the slightest doubt on the matter were allowed to arise in anyone's mind. The continued presence of France in this country is now and henceforth a fact that realists must not leave out of their considerations. . . . We shall remain.¹

The sagging sun had dropped off toward the purple edge of the world, as though gorged with the vitality it had taken from the determined enthusiasts for *la champs de course*.

Earlier in the afternoon, the sharp clothing of the gentleman patrons, both civilians and officers of the military, had provided fresh contrast for the bright silks of dramatically attired ladies or Chinese rich enough to hold boxes. But here, at the approach of the main race, the starch had gone out of their careful tailoring, even as the color seemed drained from the fabrics which so full-bloodedly had reflected the earlier heat. The pristine note had as well crumpled out of the more suitable if less dazzling garments of the younger women. Yet over the whole enterprise—the stands and clubhouse, from those indolently lounging as well as those feverishly about the business of betting—a sense of unified purpose rose like a murmurous cloud to combat the common discomfiture. Against the unfriendly stare of this alien sky it reiterated a declaration with both defiance and hysteria in it: We will conduct ourselves and our sport as we would at home. We will have a good time. We will enjoy ourselves after our own fashion, regardless of this climate which is not suited to us, and the hatred which seems to seep from the very earth. We are here to make a life, and we will make it in our way. We are here . . .

One with the general wilting without the sustaining bravado of the other patrons, Peggy stirred negligently around in her chair. The lowering sun had brought its sheaves into the box, fading, but still hot enough to sustain the slick of perspiration under the girdle necessitated by her linen suit. "I probably smell like a bear's den," she thought, and laughed confidently.

¹Remain: Stay; be left behind; continue in the same place, form, or condition.—Webster.

"What's so funny?"

"The horses," she said. "They're the only things that look r-really right in the whole place. And they'd be l-laughed off a regular track."

Intent on the list of entries, Shepherd grunted. Stretching, she put out a hand and squeezed his forearm. The feel of the muscles under the thin sleeve sent a jolt of pleasure up her wrist. She chuckled again. It was wonderful to be so happy—to be able to push off the heat and to discount her sense of physical frowziness by just thinking of the hours since yesterday. Her hold tightened. Shep—Shep—Shep darling . . .

Late in the afternoon he had hired a car for what, he said, was the Tour de l'Inspection. Out Rue Catinat, through the somnolent dusk, with lights beginning to show from the sidewalk cafés and promenaders in the cooling streets, across the Arroyo de l'Avalanche for the cascades of tropical sight, sound, and odors beyond, and back along the embankment of the Chinese Arroyo to a restaurant for an orgy of such food as she never had known. Then the long, beautiful night, petit déjeuner on the hotel terrace this morning—"just as if we were honeymooners, or married people who liked each other"—and the car again for a mysterious expedition which to her mammoth delight had ended at the Botanical Gardens—and a zoo!

She had not wanted to come to the track—after having telephoned such a lame refusal to Paul Savery—but before his insistence about its being such a rare occasion she had at last reluctantly let him break her away from the fascinating animals.

"Well, what's it now?"

She started, her eyes focusing on his. He was watching her with a puzzled grin.

"Just thinking."

• "About the monkeys?"

"Never mind," she said, letting go of his arm. "I th-think about lots of things you d-don't know anything about."

"Like what?"

She colored freshly. "If you won't t-talk to me—I can think

about whatever I w-want. I said the horses w-were the only things here that l-looked—alive.”

“Not the ones that I pick, they aren’t.”

“Sh-shall I give you another t-tip?”

“Don’t rub it in. The only winner we’ve had—because it looked like your aunt.” He scowled at the list. “But all right, if you see any more relatives, let me know. It’s as good as any system with these goats.”

She took his arm again. “Let’s go h-home and f-f-f——”

“Peggy—please!”

“—forget this heat,” she snapped, jerking her hand away.

“You’re tired?”

“You know I n-never get tired. This place is g-giving me the j-jumps, that’s all. And you d-do too!”

“Just one more, please, baby. It’s the big race. Then we’ll go.”

She gave a little mock snarl and subsided into the hot chair.

“All right. B-but tell them to hurry.”

“Maybe I could dig up something if I scratched around,” he frowned. “You’re sure you don’t mind being alone for a little while?”

“Do you mind leaving me?”

“Not so much if you mind if I do.”

After a judicial pondering she nodded. “You can go.” As he immediately stood up, she said, “Well, you n-needn’t be quite so prompt about it!”

“I wish I could kiss you.”

“Go and s-scratch up a tout. I c-can wait. B-but I wish you c-could too,” she added in a smaller voice. “And when we’re h-home can I l-listen to your heart? I won’t lie heavy.”

He dropped down onto his chair again. “I love you, Peg. Honest to God, I——”

“Sh-Shep, people will——”

“Let ’em! I want everybody to know just how I feel!” Suddenly he made a face at once embarrassed and gentle. “If I’d ever written a line like that I’d have thought I was losing my grip.”

"You'd b-better go before I lose m-mine."

He touched her upturned face, the almost frightening sense of her importance washing over him again. "Paul Savery's been watching from his box down there for an hour, waiting for a chance to slide over."

"I wish he would. I'd like to tell him I'm s-sorry about standing him up."

"Are you?"

"N-no."

He rose again, and, turning, faced Paul Savery.

"Good afternoon." The heavy face was tinged with the same purple flush which had marked it at the Casino, and a faint, sickish scent of alcohol rode out on his breath. But his eyes were clear, his voice as steady as it had been the day before at the hotel.

"I thought I must inquire after Mademoiselle's indisposition. I am pleased to see that it is not so severe as that which kept my wife at home."

"I f-felt b-better later," Peggy said, laboring under her failing with falsehood. "And Mr. Sh-Shepherd offered to b-bring me over."

"So long as you have been diverted, you are forgiven."

"Oh, it's b-been most interesting. Imagine r-races out here in the j-jungle!"

Savery bowed blandly. "We do our best to bring with us the rudiments of civilization." As Shepherd stared at him, he smiled. "And you, Mr. Shepherd, you have had a good day?"

"Depends on what you mean." Had that amazing claim been irony or just French conceit? "Pictorially I've enjoyed this gay little facet of Indo-China's debt to your country's cultural mission"—he let the phrase slur slightly—"but as for racing luck, no."

Unexpectedly, Savery laughed. "These horses do not readily figure. However, in the next race there is one that may—what is your phrase?—get you well."

"That's encouraging."

"More than that—almost a certainty. I already have made my

wager, but if you hasten to make one on Beau Maréchal, I will wait with Mlle. George."

"Well, thanks, that's nice of you." He thought rapidly, returning the cold, brilliant smile. Why should Savery give him a good tip? To show off before Peggy, perhaps, for he could not accept the offer as stemming from simple friendliness. On the other hand, leading him to bet on a poor chance might be a way of getting even for his jibe about the colonial policy. Still, he needed a winner; his bad choices thus far had whittled at his wallet until it now contained only little more than a thousand piastres.

Peggy was inviting Savery to sit down. As he complied, she looked up past him with a suggestion of her two-eyed wink. "Better hurry, Mr. Shepherd. Your sc-scratching's d-done."

That she thus should refer to Savery as a tipster made him feel easier about leaving her, and with a short laugh for her feminine perfidy, he went quickly off down the aisle.

Shouldering through the crowd toward the baroque betting booths, he heard his name being called. From the milling betters popped a stack of disheveled laundry topped by a wet red face—Taras.

"Hello there," he said, pausing. "How goes it?"

The hardware salesman mopped at his neck with a wadded handkerchief. "Good—good! My luck with horses is superior to that of matching coins, it would seem." His chubby cheeks fashioned an engaging smile. "And you—how are you doing?"

"So far, not good, but I think I have a good thing in the next one. Would you like it?"

He made the offer hopefully; if Savery's tip was as sound as it promised to be, his sense of guilt for swindling this artless sucker out of the bar bill would be quieted. When Taras beamed and nodded appreciatively, he hastened to rid himself of the nagging obligation.

"It's Beau Maréchal."

Taras sighed, his smile dropping. "Ah no. He is the favorite, of course; but the price is too short. Even if he were to collect it," he added with a gay giggle.

"So—it's a boat race?"

"A what? Oh! You mean an"—he wagged his fat hands—"an arrangement. A boat race—that is good! Such a colorful language, yours."

"French isn't so bad either. I like that word 'arrangement,'" he added gently.

Taras nodded, but his expression became guarded. "So explicit, yes. I thought you might have come by the same knowledge," he said cautiously. "It would have reinforced my ease about what is planned—but still, I am satisfied. My source has not failed me all day."

"So a fix is in. Well, that's a nice thing to know. Congratulations."

Globules of sweat began to pop out on the drummer's forehead, like tokens of struggle behind its bulging planes. He so obviously was considering sharing his secret that Shepherd, carefully maintaining an encouraging smile, could almost hear him wrestling toward a decision. Then suddenly the crimson face began to glow, as if with the triumphing spirit of good deeds.

"I promised to tell no soul," he whispered hoarsely. "The less bets the more return, you are aware. But you gave me what you knew, wrong as it is, like a gentleman friend." Gulping down a breath, he jammed a finger at his damp program. "Look—Isabelle!"

"Isabelle? The long shot?"

"If too much is not wagered on her." The possibility placed an open testimony of regret on his face, and as though determined to salvage something from the quixotic gesture that had prompted it he asked anxiously, "I am a good sport, no?"

Shepherd took one of the limp hands hanging like disconsolate weights at his sides and pressed it warmly. "That you are! And Santa Claus besides!"

As he started hastily away he heard the mercenary side of his reluctant benefactor's nature give one last gasp: "Not too much of a play, hein? The price——"

He signaled back reassuringly. Working through the crowd, he lined up at one of the less active windows and emptied

the last of the clip money from his pocket. Obtaining his ticket on Isabelle just before the warning sounded, he joined the excited press moving toward the rail. A place of vantage opened up just as the horses came out onto the track and his glance flicked over the identifying numbers—past Beau Maréchal, a dainty-footed roan, to a dun-colored animal looming over the rest of the field like a big girl in a class of petites.

His heart gave an apprehensive jump. Isabelle looked so out of place amid the small native stock that it seemed impossible for her to have been overlooked. If she was a new import her strangeness should have caused her to be hopefully bet. If she were familiar to these people, her long price could only mean that they had reason to dismiss her. Had Taras, suspecting their trickery on the boat, done just what he feared of Savery and touted him onto an empty chance? He shrugged off the thought. It was possible—but if so, hardware's gain had been the stage's great loss. And of course, he considered, watching the horses line up at the barrier, a bad record by this foolish-looking fugitive from a glue works could be an integral part of the arrangement.

He liked the looks of the jockey up. Plastered like a besilkened leech to Isabelle's neck, he had a qualified seat, a nice pair of hands, and a firm set to his brown jaw. At least there was a boy in the boot who looked capable of giving them a run for their money. The prize money, it devoutly was to be hoped!

The start was fast, with the scramble bunched and driving. The whole field was in contention until the first turn, but as it passed the pole a black streak of horse shot out in front like a watermelon seed pinched from strong fingers. "Beau Maréchal!" screamed the crowd. Shepherd could feel his feet beginning to turn cold. He saw a trailing rider go to the whip as if trying to beat the hide off his huge mount, and shut his eyes. When he opened them the black horse was crossing the wire, breezing. Against his ears jammed the ecstatic roar of the favorite players: "Beau Maréchal!"

Far back in the dust he saw what appeared to be a camel

shambling through the dust, but what he knew to be the corpse of an arrangement called Isabelle—

Savery looked up cheerfully when he returned to the box. "A running horse, eh, that Beau?"

"Yes indeed. Thanks."

"Nothing, nothing," in false deprecation. "Not much of a price, of course, but even money is better than a kick in the face."

"That depends on whose face gets kicked." He felt better as he saw the condescending good will leave Savery's bright-button eyes and heard the annoying graciousness gone from his voice when he spoke again:

"My wife and I are giving a small dinner party this evening. I have asked Miss George to join us, but she tells me that she has an engagement with you. Perhaps you too might care to attend?"

"I told him we have some f-f-f"—Peggy glared at him, denying—"friends to meet!"

His foot moved against hers. "No, that's tomorrow night. It would be all right with me, if it is for you."

"Oh, was it?" with a sharpening glance. "Well, s-sure, then."

"Good," Savery said, rising. "Are you staying for the last race, Mr. Shepherd, or may I drop you at your hotel?"

"Thanks, but I have a car."

"Perhaps you might care to dismiss it? I believe that you will be more comfortable in mine, considering how poor are the vehicles now for rent in Saigon."

"This one's not too bad," Shepherd said, a tickle fingering across his back. "And who can tell? If we stay I might get touted onto another good thing."

Savery's color darkened. "I am sorry that I am not able to oblige you; perhaps another time. And you, *ma chérie*," he asked Peggy deliberately, "also wish to remain?"

"I'll leave with the g-guy who b-brung me."

"Until tonight, then. About nine? My address is in the telephone book." He bent over her hand, gave Shep a short bow,

and left with a deftness peculiar in a body of such form and weight.

"I d-don't get it," Peggy said. "You like him l-like a hole in the h-head—yet you want to go to his house."

"Oh, he has his points."

"Of course he does! He gives you a winner, and you insult him r-right to his f-face!"

"A face like that ought to be used to it."

Suddenly she began to grin. "You didn't b-bet that horse, did you? Did you? You d-don't like him so much you wouldn't even t-take his tip! And then you were a-ashamed and it made you sore!"

"I just didn't want to spoil his fun, that's all."

"Go on! You didn't want to admit you hadn't b-because that would have been worse than his being so c-cocky." Then a new thought caused her face to straighten. "So you l-lost. M-much?"

"Come on, let's go."

"Stop looking sh-sheepish and tell me! Not all the rest of what you h-had yesterday?" As he did not answer she cried, "Shep! It was enough to ch-choke a horse!"

"There's a horse named Isabelle I wish had choked on it."

"So we're b-broke," she said after a moment. "Was that w-why you said we'd go there tonight?"

He frowned. "Well, that friend I got the loan from yesterday—it might be difficult to bite him again, so soon. There's no doubt that Savery can help you at the Casino, and—oh hell, Peg, I'd like to know you're all right until I can get straightened out."

"I'll take the j-job," she said quickly. "And you w-won't have to ask your ch-cheap friend. Just you don't w-worry any more about it, do you hear? Now let's g-go."

Standing, she pulled at his arm. But as he continued to sit staring out over the track, his face tautening, she saw that the door was closing between them again.

"What's the m-matter? What are you th-thinking about?"

"About wise guys," he answered slowly. "And boobs. And the poetic way they get together to take each other." He got to his

feet and looked down at her, chagrin tincturing the edges of his smile. "Aside from knowing you, baby, my luck's pretty thin lately. But I hope there's enough left to keep me from meeting a certain fat salesman who's already laid claim to a hard life."

"What on earth do you m-m-m—"

"Just that our pigeon, Mein Herr Taras, intentionally or not, has had his revenge."

"Taras!" Her eyes widened, then narrowed as her mouth began to stretch up in a ripe gleeful semicircle. "He gave you the horse you b-bet?"

As he nodded, wincing, she began to laugh, bright volleys of sound ringing out in insouciant checkmate against the pervading ennui. Faces turned toward their box—tired, impassive, bored, sulky; yellow, brown, and white—at first in slow curiosity, then with sharper regard as masks of fatigue and discontent began to loosen before an immemorial magic ordained to touch all hearts alike.

"For heaven's sake, shut up! Everybody's looking at you!"

But the next instant the surrounding faces lightened with increasing pleasure, for she kissed him. A rattle and cry flowed toniclike over the reviving watchers. Shepherd did not hear. Caught up by the sweet impudence of the gesture, momentarily free of his sense of scheming fates, he was unmindful of what the hearty music of a laughing girl can mean to other people with problems.

VIII

INFLUENCED by the Paris Exhibitions of 1900 and 1925, Saigon's architecture follows two separate patterns, with little ramification in between. There are the high-style structures of the earlier period, scrolled and extravagant as flossy pastry, and the sharp, smooth, smartly windowed edifices of the moderne era. Both confections, equally odd against their lush backdrop, put forth

a hopefully chauvanistic "You see?" And as well both present to their native beholders fresh reasons for perplexity and mirth. How these white overlords, always so confident of the divine rightness of each new experiment, did change their minds!

Like so many wealthy houses, as opposed to the public buildings in the center of the city, Savery's villa was a trim example of *les arts décoratifs*. In its own small formal park, it had the utilitarian chic of a stylized bedpan. To Shepherd's surprise, however, the interior glowed with a livability unpromised by the shrieking smartness of its façade. Flowers warmed the tailored walls, piles of books and magazines toned down lacquered table tops. A scrap of bright knitting run through with steel needles lay on a huge cerise divan as though dropped by the hostess upon the arrival of her first guests. An artful touch, he wondered, or was Mme. Savery more domestic than she looked? Certainly the pervading charm seemed less a matter of *décor* than of personality—and as an expression of gracious and intelligent spirit, not her husband's personality.

Savery had greeted them in the entry hall, his eyes already glittering with cocktails. "Alix, mon cher!" he called into the main room. Taking her wrap, his glance swept admiringly over Peggy. "Ravissantel!" He handed the cloak back to a houseboy without relinquishing his avid inspection. "Ah, Shepherd, indeed you are fortunate to have such a one mad about you!"

"I don't think you've much cause for complaint," Shepherd heard himself say. He had seen Alix Savery excuse herself to a group in the room beyond, and was watching her quick approach. Her long body moved deftly beneath a cloth-of-gold gown. Tiny jade ornaments, clever offset to the serene eyes, struck highlights from a casque of shining hair. Carved bracelets swung from her wrists, heavy emphasis on their delicacy. And just as he had disliked to have her leave yesterday, he now found himself pleased by this resumption of her nearness.

She joined them with hands outstretched in welcome. "It is so nice of you to come, Miss George." Despite the depth of her tone she sounded almost gay. "Your singing at the Casino—such a delight to exiles like us."

"Th-thanks," said Peggy.

Shepherd could feel her stiffen at the curiosity which fled over Alix's smile before she turned it to him. "And to have the other new arrival too—well, we are to be proud."

"You are more than kind."

Savery took Peggy's arm firmly above the elbow. "Come," he said, drawing her inside, "I must share my catch with these other poor exiles."

His voice was jovial, but from a tightening of his wife's lips, Shepherd knew that the barb of face value lay in his affably colored words. As they followed Savery's loud fanfare of introduction, she looked up at him.

"You enjoyed our little track this afternoon?"

He shook his head, and asked, "Aren't you wondering why I came here tonight?"

"I was—yes."

"I'll tell you later, in case you haven't already guessed."

She repressed a quick frown. They had reached the group to which Savery was presenting Peggy, and with graceful competence she began the same service for him. He smiled. She either had the most complete poise he had ever encountered, or a great deal of jewelry.

Landowners, industrialists, concessionaires, a banker, and an evidently fashionable doctor—for the most part the company was on a level with Savery's position in the community. The exceptions, he judged, were there by courtesy of abilities (in some way) to help sustain it. One, named Eng, was an official from the capital at Pnom-Penh, talking in a voice raised to near hysteria: "I assure you there isn't an important Cambodian in the whole Issarak pack of bandits! We have no room in our country for Francophobes—none! I have it that the King himself has admitted that our destiny is with the French Union! How may we hope for complete independence—so poor, so lacking in means of defense?"

There was a murmur at Shepherd's elbow: "A realist——"

"Well, Inspector—is this business or pleasure?"

"For me, those are synonyms," Duphaine answered with his

deprecatory shrug. "But my presence here tonight—only social."

"Then let's have a drink." He stopped a boy with a tray of cocktails. "And maybe some talk about legitimate thieves. Politics—remember?—makes my head hurt."

"Ah, Shepherd, you are a strange man of letters."

"Why do you say that?" he asked when they had moved with their glasses to a window seat. "Maurice LeBlanc kept busy enough with simple crime, didn't he?"

"But it was many years ago that the good Arsène Lupin functioned, remember. Today Leroux might find his problems more complicated. And then, did you not say that you were writing no more about the—minor scum? I should think that the winds now loose across the world would afford a great opportunity for melodrama of a higher order."

"Perhaps you should have been a literary, rather than a police, agent."

"Good ones are keepers of conscience in both fields, no?"

"And you are a good one?"

"And I am a good one."

"Let's drink to that—I'm sure it's true."

They tasted the liquor and Duphaine got out cigarettes. "So you have made the acquaintance of Paul Savery."

"I imagine you've been able to trace the connection through Miss George. He's also a friend of yours, I take it."

"An acquaintance. As a matter of fact this is my first visit. I must admit that the invitation was in the nature of a surprise."

"Perhaps they were a little worried about the silverware."

"Oh, I think not," placidly. "I would not imagine M'sieur Savery to be one who would need aid in protecting his own."

Shepherd saw his gaze touch on Alix at the far end of the room, before it bent down into his glass. The concern which he had experienced yesterday came back. These quiet offhand remarks, apparently irrelevant but always like little warning signals—were they accidental or pointed? Was this quiet-speaking shield actually suspicious? He could feel annoyance begin to tighten him up, and as a mitigative measure reached for less sensitive ground:

"That Mr. Eng from Pnom-Penh—what's the movement he doesn't like?"

"Issarak—the so-called Free Cambodia action. Mostly bandits, as he said, although I have no doubt that some at first were inspired by a misguided zeal. They are being controlled, of course, but it remains an unfortunate situation."

"This—banditry seems to stay pretty prevalent through the country, doesn't it?"

Duphaine shrugged again. "As might be expected, following time of rebellion. History tells of such guerrilla bands after your Civil War, brigands taking advantage of unsettled times."

"Yes, but not for patriotic reasons. They were just self-seeking outlaws."

"The problem is the same," the inspector said patiently. He was silent, then sighed. "I spoke something of this yesterday. At risk of boring you, I will elaborate, in that I see it my duty to explain our position when I can. I have gathered that the situation here is confusing to the outside world."

Shepherd nodded, and he continued more briskly, like a speaker on a rehearsed theme. "When the Japs were loose upon the land, it was possible for the provinces of Annam and Tonkin to break free of our paternal control and to establish what, at the convention of March 7, 1946, we recognized as the Viet Nam Republic, a free state within the Indo-Chinese Federation of the French Union. Very well—fait accompli—so be it. Our administration ceased there. But not satisfied, their president, Ho Chi-minh, asked for complete autonomy and as well the attachment of Cochin China—most valuable of the remaining provinces—to their league, known as the Viet Minh."

"Would the Cochin Chinese like that?"

"A matter of opinion," Duphaine replied shortly. "Magnanimously, we permitted that they hold a popular referendum upon the question. Until they decide that they wish to make such a union it is our contention that those who make trouble are but"—he shrugged once more—"troublemakers."

"And when's this referendum to be held?"

"In due course," with a new note of sharpness in his voice. "After all resistance to us has ceased."

"I see," Shepherd said gravely.

Duphaine flicked him with a quick glance. "I hope that you do, Mr. Shepherd. It may assist you to appreciate my task of keeping the watch for those who might, as I told you yesterday, seek a profit from the friction."

He turned as he spoke, with such meaningful directness that Shepherd almost jumped. There was no doubt about it—Duphaine was suspicious! But because, as relief welled up within him, the detective suspected that he might be tied in with the insurrectionists!

"Look here, by any chance are you——"

He began to laugh, but a thought checked it abruptly. Did Paul Savery, or any other of these gentlemen with large local stakes, have similar notions about his being connected with those who would tip over the status quo? Could that be why Duphaine was here, admittedly for the first time—so that these business giants might be assured by seeing law enforcement actually at work? He glanced around casually, but no one was looking their way except Peggy, bearing down on them like a full-rigged craft before a strong wind.

"Hello, you ch-chaps. Don't get up," she said, plumping down between them. "Just let me g-get this away from those octopuses. I've been n-nipped until I feel like a d-dart board."

"With such a target, how could they miss?"

She scowled threateningly and turned to Duphaine. "Inspector, why d-don't you arrest this m-man?"

"I've an idea he's been thinking along those lines," Shepherd said. As Duphaine's eyebrows flinched he added cheerfully, "With me out of the way he could take you to dinner. But it won't be necessary, Inspector. All I ask is a running start—toward another cocktail."

"There's y-your charge," Peggy said. "Drunk and d-disorderly."

Standing, Shepherd looked, as sincerely as he could, down into the detective's eyes. "Believe me, it's the only one you might have reason to make."

Duphaine held his gaze for a long moment, then an expression like happiness began to shine on his careful features. His head bobbed. "Bon! If that is all, no comment! For who in the past has not one time been—disorderly?" He put out his hand. "It is a deal?"

"Such a spirit truly deserves the girl. M'sieur, she is yours."

"Don't m-mind me," Peggy said.

"I shan't. You're the spoils of circumstance." He bowed and went over to where Alix Savery, momentarily forsaking her catalytic course among the party's yet unresolved quotients, was paused like a great gilt butterfly against a table edge.

"Are you having a good time, Mr. Shepherd?"

"Seeing you again is good enough for me."

"But you wish that we were alone for that talk?" she asked in a lowered voice.

"If it can be arranged—yes."

"After dinner, I'll meet you on the terrace. And Miss George," she asked in a normal tone. "She is enjoying herself?"

"I guess so. She's over there with Inspector Duphaine."

"Oh yes. I don't know him," she told his inquiring look, "but my husband believes in keeping his fences mended."

"The inspector would be a good man to have on anybody's side of a fence."

"I'm glad you've recognized that. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll see what's holding up dinner." She smiled again, and went off toward the doors at the end of the room, an efficient wife concerned about the pleasure of her husband's friends.

"Mustn't t-touch." Beside him, Peggy was watching the slender retreating figure.

"What'd you do with Duphaine?"

"Paul wanted to talk to him. They w-went outside. Do you l-like her, Shep?"

"So Savery wanted a private confab with the inspector."

"Yes. Do you think she's attractive?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

"I hate her!"

"Now, Peg——"

"I do! I h-hate all those snooty j-janes who look at you like you were nothing just b-because they caught a rich husband. As if that one of h-hers was worth having!"

"He's been bothering you? He's sort of tight, y'know."

She examined a thought, screwing up her face like a marmoset inspecting a nut. "I don't think he is at all. Oh, he l-laughs a lot, and acts silly, and tries to pass off his p-pawing that way—but I think it's all a g-gag. Moreover," she added unexpectedly, "I d-don't think he gets drunk. I th-think he j-just lies back behind s-seeming so—watching, like a s-snake in the grass."

"Watching what?"

"Anything that m-might get in his way. Be c-careful of him, Shep."

"We've no reason to tangle, except over you. And now I don't even have that to worry about."

"You never d-did—you fool. Why, I wouldn't g-give him the time of day if it w-wasn't for that job. But y-you'd better keep clear of him." She said after a moment, "I think he h-hates you—so lay off that w-wife of his. Besides, she's s-skinny."

"Isn't svelte the word?"

"I mean it!" emphatically. "There's s-something wrong about h-her too."

"Just where?"

"Will you listen? There is! Oh, she's b-beautiful, and a lady, and everything—and men would think she's just w-wonderful. But she doesn't f-fool me. She's not a w-woman at all."

"You mean she's a female impersonator?"

"Exactly! Under all that nice charm—she hasn't any m-more heart than—than y-you have!"

The doors at the end of the room had opened for an announcement of dinner. He saw Savery come in from the terrace with Duphaine, search the room until his quick glance found Peggy, and start toward her with a cry of "There you are, ma chérie!"

"Don't say you w-weren't warned," Peggy said. "About both of them."

IX

DINNER was long and elaborate, with the accompanying wines of a distinguished cellar. Shepherd felt himself giving way to their equal blandishments, his sense of caution lulled; but with Savery boisterously drinking more than any two guests, he continued to relax in the warm bath of an enjoyable present. His place was between the wife of the Cambodian official, and the banker, Duclos. Both had the internationals' facility with English, but while Mrs. Eng's offered shy if delightfully stated platitudes, Duclos's was the vehicle for an elegant wit. He was so likable, so amusingly soignée, that Shepherd found himself venturing toward discussion of a loan. It was such an outrageous idea that he abandoned it with difficulty. Humor was a quality to be treasured—and how his companion might flee before an admission that his only security was a problematical letter in Shanghai! The thought was sufficiently chill-making to dissipate his numbing peace. Leaning forward, he looked up the table at Peggy.

On Savery's right, she was dubiously watching a waiter refill her glass. His eyes clouded. Poor kid—her distaste for champagne must be less than her need of an antidote for the host's attention. He moved back in his chair, screening off the sight of Savery bending toward her. He had to get going soon—had to!

As he lifted his glass he caught Alix's glance just leaving his face. She did not bring it back, but turned interestedly to her partner, the dazzled Cambodian. Nor did she look his way again until, with the liqueurs, she arose to take the ladies into the drawing room—and then he was but a participant in her general smile. Yet he felt that she was thinking about him. The surety, and the proximity of their rendezvous, stirred him. But why, he wondered with a queer exasperation, did she give the impression of being full of canaries?

Restless, he had a brandy with Duclos, refused a cigar, and excused himself. Although the other men were still seated, he had to risk an observed exit to the terrace that flanked the house. But if Alix were to go out on it from the other room, it would be worth it; later there might not be a chance to talk without interruptions from her admirers. He was almost to the long glass doors when Savery called out, asking if he had a light head. With a show of embarrassment he pantomimed that, yes, he needed some air. This was no time for vanity, even if he could afford it.

The night was soft and clear, stung through with bitter-sweet fragrance from a carpet of flowers that swept up to the stone balustrade. The heavy odor stuck in his lungs. How life in the Orient smelled of death! Early fruition and quick decay—transient metabolism under a forced draft of humid heat that brought forth blooms with the stamp of putrefaction already upon them, yet contributing, he knew, to his own peculiar thralldom.

She joined him before he had finished a cigarette. The high moon splattered filaments in her hair, burnished the squarely held shoulders. The rest was her face, modeled as though from the depths of tranquillity.

"So," she said, "you lost at the races."

"And so I'll need more money."

"Does that mean you've done nothing about what we discussed?"

"My man is working on it."

"While you were at the track."

"Yes—losing your clip."

"If I give you another piece of jewelry do you think it might go to more direct ends?"

"Look," he snapped, "if you're going to worry about costs, let's forget the whole thing right now! It's no bus ticket you're buying, y'know."

"I'm aware of that. . . ." She paused as though to weigh her next words, then tossed them at him, almost casually. "And as for forgetting the whole thing, I have no wish to, Mr. Shepherd

—and I'm afraid you cannot. For when you pawned that clip you entered my employ."

He threw away the cigarette. It bumped across a clump of violet petals and disappeared. "So I'm on the hook," he said slowly. "All you have to do is report your doodad lost, strayed, or stolen—it turns up in that hock shop—and I'm in the Bastille. Nicely played, madame."

"There is no need for such talk, Mr. Shepherd. If you thought I sounded . . . threatening—well, it is only because I am desperate. Truly so," she said in a rising voice.

"You sound afraid."

"I am—completely so!" She hesitated. "You have had a chance to observe my husband—does he seem normal to you? Can't you see what the drugs are doing to him?"

He looked down the empty terrace. His heart was pumping faster now, like an engine thrown into a higher gear. "He's an addict?"

"So you have not noticed." She brushed the back of one hand across her forehead. "Or perhaps it is evident only to me. But I know—let me tell you that I know."

"I didn't think opium users got violent—to the contrary. Unless they can't get it, maybe. And surely there's no difficulty about that here, where it's made."

"If only it were the pipe—that would be little or nothing! Of course there is no secret how many of the colony fight boredom with it, and leave it behind when they go back to France. No, it is the terrible ones—cocaine, heroin—from which a man becomes a crazy beast. . . ." Dropping her hand, she took a shaky breath. "You must busy yourself at once, Mr. Shepherd!"

"I'll need more money," he repeated.

"Yes, yes—I'll bring you something tomorrow. Not to the hotel, though. Is there someplace——"

"How about the Botanical Gardens?"

"Excellent. I go there often."

"Make it to the zoo, in front of the monkey cage. That's fitting, isn't it?"

She smiled, half pleadingly, half with the look of satisfaction

she had worn at the end of dinner. "One need not sound so—annoyed. Ten o'clock at the monkey cage. And now I must get back inside. Our new houseboy is not good about the coffee."

She went back into the drawing room with the same light, quiet grace with which she had appeared. Through the window he could see her moving attentively among the waiting women, laughing at some small joke, easily patching over her absence. The familiar ferment of impending danger was stealing toward his heart. But as he went thoughtfully down to the door through which he had passed a few minutes before, with disturbing clarity he recognized that for the first time in memory he did not welcome its approach.

The men were still at the table, clouded with cigar smoke and intent upon a discussion which did not pause when he joined them. They were still speaking English, in deference to a florid diplomat who was saying, "Gentlemen, I bid you to remember that you are not alone in treating with native populations, and pray that your representatives carry their negotiations through with the utmost wisdom. It may come to you with surprise that we of the Netherlands watch for your way of handling your present difficulties. You may provide us with a path to follow in Indonesia."

"Ah, there is Shepherd," Savery cried. "I was fearful lest he already had escaped with our little chanteuse." He stood up, barrel torso weaving slightly on chunky legs. "Come—I must see that such a disaster does not occur!"

Shepherd waited until, herding the others before him, he was near. Then he stepped closer, extending his hand. "I must offer my gratitude—there hasn't been such cuisine since Foyot's of the old days. And the wine!"

Looking into Savery's eyes, he saw no error in the keen pupils, and the hand which took his was as cool and firmly resilient as an athlete's.

"Merci! Now that is a fine thing for you to say! So we did not poison you after all, eh?"

"If you have, I can't imagine a more pleasant way to die."

Savery shot him a look of hard amusement. "Specious, my

good young man. Death is never pleasant." His hand grasped Shepherd's upper arm, blunt fingers prodding into its muscles. Shepherd grinned. Was it his turn for a check-over?

As they entered the larger room he saw Peggy's eyes widen at their clubby pairing. When Duclos intercepted Savery, he continued on to the stiff chair on which she sat eying him curiously.

"If you've f-found a new playmate, it's all right. I'm the t-tolerant type."

"What was his pitch at dinner?"

"Routine," she said wearily. "He wants to go to the Casino, when they b-break up here, and speak to D-Dracot."

"Brush it off," he ordered quickly. "It's better if he does it when you're not there, as though it weren't just personal. Tell him to call Dracot tomorrow."

"I'd rather. I've had enough of him and the r-rest of these characters for one n-night."

"We can go soon; this kind of shindig, nobody stays long after dinner. All that food and drink on top of the heat."

"It's the d-dames who're getting me down," she said with an asperity as strange as her fatigue. "They m-make me feel like the homely girl at a d-dance, Shep. They're all so kind of mean, in a n-nice way. Mrs. Savery was out of the room a f-few minutes ago, and right away they all b-began to talk in French, l-like a league against me."

Puzzlement and strain were pulling so unhappily at the round sweeps of her face that he put his hand against her head and patted the light hair. Little Peg, so dumb on her feet, so wise on her back—

"Oh, you're just imagining it."

"I wish I w-was, but I'm not. You know how I like people to l-like me. But it's always the same," with a regretful sigh. "Women just don't. I w-wonder why?"

"Baby, baby—if you could only see yourself running up a flight of stairs, you'd know."

"Stop it! You j-just make me feel worse. I can't help it if I s-stick out."

There was such a fierce protective feeling tearing at him that

he kept his voice steady with an effort. "Go and tell Savery you've a headache, and we'll get under way."

"W-wilco."

Their departure was effected with more simplicity than he had expected. Joining several guests who already were moving toward the door, he gave his thanks to Alix. She smiled appreciatively. ". . . and do hope that we may see you soon again." As they were shaking hands, her fingers noncommittally gracious within his, Savery appeared with Peggy. He looked surly; probably, Shepherd thought, because he had not been able to restrain Peggy from leaving. Seconding Alix's invitation, there was an ugly note in his voice:

"Yes, Mr. Shepherd—now that you have found your way, I should like to hear of your travels. I am sure they have been most interesting."

"They have indeed. And I am sure we have enough tastes in common for you to find them diverting."

It was a stiff, almost a defensive reply, and his chagrin was not assuaged by the amusement with which Savery accepted it. In the car he reviewed the exchange distastefully, but as the little machine hammered along the silver streets, his hipbone comfortably in the cushion of Peggy's thigh, his annoyance soon was blotted up by the gently unfurling night. Its components were old familiars which had never ceased to lift him, to slake the thirst first caused by those maps in the dingy Chicago house—the swinging Chinese moon, the dim smell of frying food, faint laughter and the twang of minor music, perfumes from the verdure through which they tunneled; and the promises, mysterious and exotic, held in the amber of damp warmth.

"I love the East," he said drowsily, "and have ever since I came up on deck that morning for my first look at Yokohama——"

It was like yesterday—the wide harbor narrowed with breakwaters under a pall of soot, and him staring ecstatically at the customs declaration form which asked if he was importing any gramophones, sewing machines, bicycles, cow bezoar, refined liver, rhinoceros horn, alcoholic liquors, roasted chestnuts, or black tea?

He began to tell her of it, at first lazily, then with increasing beat as the handspike of memory turned the revolving arc of his delighted days—of the massive beauty of his first buddha, in the great park at Kamakura, and hurrying like a starveling to a feast on the few remaining miles to Tokyo. That was where, in Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece, the Imperial Hotel, a room boy had asked him if he wanted to see the Prostitute Guitar. He had followed, curious about the Japanese drama, to end up in a section which contained not a theater, but scores of small houses bewilderingly similar in their cleanliness and neat simplicity. Before each sat a barker on a box, gesturing invitingly with a bamboo cane. Their spiel was based upon long glass cases, illuminated with neon lights, containing colored photographs of the entertainers beyond the red cloth slits of the entrance doorways.

The Prostitute—Quarter! Home of over three thousand hopeless little trulls, where, engraved across the face of one of the forlorn little nests, there was a motto which he had not been able to forget, either:

Oh, my dear young men,
You may work hard and you may play hard.
Life is short as any dream.

Then the specialized grandeur of Nikko, the country's measure for the term magnificent: "Don't say kekko until you have seen Nikko." Nara, with its sacred deer and fifteenth-century five-storied pagoda. Kyoto, for a thousand years the capital city, and residence of the fabulous House of the Forty-Seven Warriors, once the almost legendary establishment of the clique of samurai who had murdered an insane emperor before committing mass suicide. With time, it had become a meeting place for elite playboys like Bobby Narumiya, whom he had met in one of the increasingly popular dance halls featuring hostesses and American music, and who had taken him there.

That night came back in flashes: an enormous house set in a garden of sculptured cypress surrounded by block-long walls; birdlike chatter and laughter from the geishas shredding through

the tinkling wail of shamishens; Narumiya in a Cornell golf team blazer—and the little taxi dancer who had come with them, almost as much a stranger as he in these ancient surroundings, her contemporary dress and cheap slippers and wise slang already generations away from the formal costumes and traditional gestures, the flat glances above fluttering fans and dedication of the old way of life of her rigorously trained, so different, sisters.

Japan—so clean, so charming, so delicately lovely, so admirably respectful of its heritages—had made him uneasy. There was something awry here other than the growing pains typified by this problem girl of the new Japan and the armed glares at China. Tourists were amazed by the worried questions of simple peasants: Why does America hate us so? Why are great fleets being built to destroy us? Must the outside world learn again of our protecting Kamikaze, the destroying wind?

In the cities were sullen looks from booted young men. Bifocaled Germans with brief cases and military backs strode freely in and out of the ministries. Occasional scraps of hot, fuzzy, threatening words rose above the peaceful clatter of teahouses. To shrewd reporters with censor-harassments, the Chinese “incidents” were of different stature than their acceptance at home. He had been glad to go on to Shanghai, carrying like dreadful luggage the fear that a crazy current was blundering these on-the-make little people toward the greatest of blunders. . . .

“I can’t hold him,” Peggy thought, looking up into the absorbed face, watching it change with the shift of his mental kaleidoscope. “I’m only a piece of all this—”

Some measure of her perturbation must have worked through his envelopment, for he took her hand. But he continued with the past, picturing Shanghai before its time of travail as it teemed with the immense varietism which permitted colonizers, sportsmen, businessmen, soldiers of fortune, careerists, degenerates, imperialists, wanderers, expatriates, bureaucrats, and simple sight-seers all to find attachments in the conglomerate mass of four million people of fifty nationalities and their buildings on the banks of the Whangpoo, sixteen miles up the Yangtze

from the sea. He spoke of the fine buildings built by and for foreign capital on the Bund—and those where Chinese of the lower classes disported, floors of shooting galleries, menageries, restaurants, drinking shops, cinemas, skating rinks, puppet shows, traditional dramas, slot machines, dancing, amid which the patrons fluctuated at will, giving vociferous attention to the displays entitled by the small entry fee. Bawds peacocked about freely, each accompanied by an amah, the more subduedly attired and mannered woman who made the bargain. A dozen kinds of music mingled with the horrible din of thousands of tongues shrill with indications of a national deafness.

Progressively gregarious, instructed by the movies and welcoming any habit said to be popular in the United States, the modernity-worshipers found their greatest after-dark amusement on dance floors. Outside any of these bright halls might have been one of the lanes where, asleep or dead, lay examples of those who had missed holds on the whirligig of changing China. Inside, revolving lights shone through glass floors, suffusing the economic fortunates in layers of changing color. While, as in Japan, men wore clothes as Western as the tunes, the women affected a contemporary version of native dress, one-piece garments like radiant jade that terminated at one end in choker collars and at the other in long skirts slit on both sides to the knees.

For the foreign residents there were the night clubs—the Casanova, the Little Club, the Paramount, the Canidrome, the Del Monte—and the socially sporting country clubs, where American, English, and French sectors of the colony maintained resorts which most of their members could not have afforded at home. Here would be the settlers who also frequented the centrally located and polo-conscious Shanghai Club, and the bars of the smart hotels—the Cathay, the Astor House, the Palace, the Metropole.

As he talked of these so numerous places of diversion, Shepherd's face darkened. Were they, Peggy wondered, why he did not speak on the work he had gone there to do? He did not mention newspapers, telling of vacations in Tsingtao, the Riviera of the Orient, and a visit to Peiping, for twenty generations

called Peking. His voice quickened as he described the Temple of Heaven, the Ming Tombs and the Great Wall. Yes, he must have found in those ancient stones a pull beyond the glitter and movement of Shanghai, for here he seemed to have avoided the cabarets and legation parties and stayed much on his balcony at the Grand Hotel, watching the golden ferment of light and shade on the tile roofs of the Forbidden City. In Peking he also became aware of the four distinctive features of Chinese architecture in their pure state: the curving roof, orderliness of arrangement, the rib-showing frankness of construction, and color—always deep, satisfying color. And it was in Peking too that he had visited the Lama Temple, his first and last visit to a monastery.

Sudden rain had driven him into a high dim room centered by an ornate altar of a towering buddha. In front of it were a dozen neophytes. They were singing, their clawlike hands clasped on the yellow feathers of cockade hats lying on the benches behind which they knelt. Their shrill-sweet voices soared above a basic undertone which grated like the rubbing together of iron files from a number of older men. As the rain torrented down the chant went on. When it paused one thin young voice would bridge the gap; then the chorus again, with the little round, shaved heads swaying in unison above the cheap red cotton anonymity of their robes.

Mature priests conducted the ceremony, marching through the smoky shadows in prescribed ritual under the benignant stare of the tall effigy. But the burden of the occasion lay in the tremolo of those melodic voices, veined with unrealized protest at having their childish years stripped of all that goes to make those years bearable, dedicated before they could understand.

"The rain stopped. As I crossed the great courtyard of worn, wet stones, I looked back. From the murk of the hall pale faces stared after me like olives swimming in a dish of oil. An even more melancholy note, I thought, came into their litany. Because the gate that I was going through swung, for them, but one way?"

"What am I going to do?" she cried in desperate silence. "Oh, what can I do?"

X

AT THE HOTEL he asked the driver to wait. Suspicious and sleepy, Peggy wanted a reason. "There's a monkey house I want to be out of by dawn," he told her, and no more. He took her, growling protests, into the lobby and returned to the car. Even had confidences been his custom, he saw no need to alarm her with what he was thinking. Concern did not lessen when spread out, he had found; it only multiplied. She would not have rested better to hear that he thought it advisable to raise enough money, tonight, to redeem a certain piece of jewelry in a Cholon pawnshop. And would she have slept at all, learning that Alix Savery had threatened to jail him—just before having lied about the extent of her husband's appetites?

The evening was breaking when he entered the main room of the Casino. Play was desultory, the bar almost deserted. He strolled past the emptying tables, drawn by a spate of native music and flashes of color from the dining salon. Reaching its entrance, he saw that Bijou was performing on the dance floor.

As he watched, his interest bore swiftly toward enchantment. In perfect accord with the muffled rhythm of the simple instruments, her gestures contained within a set pattern, she seemed to be acting out a story—some legend of her people's time which remained only in these spell-weaving movements and a clutter of jungle-buried, weathered carvings on root-split walls. Jeweled hands moved carefully as butterflies at the tips of her fluid arms. Under its tight brocade her body was like a snake's—strong, supple, controlled. Yet she seemed strangely unalive, a phantom of exquisite, studied taste without breath or feeling. He wondered if she was aware of what he presently was noticing—noises of boredom from her audience. "Shhhhh!" he heard himself spit

out loudly. Faces turned toward him in lazy indignation, but there was quiet until she was done.

Salaaming gracefully, she excused her musicians and walked from the floor. At the doorway she saw him.

"Oh, so it was you with the manners. I'm surprised."

Returning the look which came boldly up at him from beneath the kohled lashes, he felt the illusion of ethereality slipping away. Close up, she looked as shrewd and sexy as any métisse who ever rolled a sailor. He sighed.

"Come on, let's have a drink."

"I'm sorry; it's not permitted."

"Not——" Quick anger replaced his astonishment. "An artist like you, not allowed to——"

"I'm the one who doesn't do the permitting," she cut in coldly. "That's my line to keep from having to belly up to the bar with every stumble bum who asks me."

"What I like about you, Bijou, is when you keep your mouth shut."

"I don't like you at any time, Mr. Shepherd. So why don't you go find that floozy of yours?"

The muscles around his mouth twitched, but he said evenly, "I want to talk to you."

"You do love her, don't you? I'm surprised again. I didn't think there was any love in you."

"That's just the way I look. Inside I'm all one great big heartbeat."

"I'd like to find out about that—with an ax. What do you want?"

"Are you ready to leave now?"

"Yes, I'm through. Why? Do you want to take me home?"

"I let my driver go. Is your car here?"

"Sure of yourself, weren't you?"

"Medium size. The hotel's not much out of your way. Come on."

Sudden lines of fury dug into her face like sharp nails. "If you want my company you'll see me to my door!" Pushing past him, she strode toward the exit, her rich gown and ornamental head-

dress an angry thread through the conservative shades of the rest of the room.

He followed as quickly as prudence would permit, side glances out for Duphaine. But as he had hoped, Peggy's refusal apparently had caused Savery to cancel his idea of moving the party here, and he reached the checkroom without the necessity of explanations.

Helping Bijou fold herself into a cocoon of gold-patterned cloak, he accompanied her haughty silence out to the portecochere. A car slid out of the parking file as soon as she was under the identifying light. He was still close behind when the chasseur pulled open the door and she got in, making room for him on the narrow seat. As they thumped down the drive he handed her a lighted cigarette.

"I've been thinking over what you said at your place, and the more I did, the more interesting it got."

She took a long inhalation and let the smoke drift slowly from her tiny nostrils. "So my map began to seem as important as I said it was."

"Let's forget that map. To the right party it might mean a lot, but I'm still more interested in money than in archaeology."

"There's money behind that archaeology—real treasure."

"Sure, sure," he said impatiently; "but I need cash here and now."

"Well?"

"You lack only part of what you need for that shipment. Give me five thousand piastres from the rest, and I'll wire Louis Hâi that you've got it all."

"What good would that do?"

"It figures just like it did before! Once delivered, rather than take it back, Louis'll probably let you have it for what you can pay."

"I guess you must be pretty broke," she said with a sidelong glance.

"Never mind about that. What do you say?"

"I say I'm enjoying this a lot!" Her voice was abrupt with contempt. "I tried everything I could with you, and got turned

down flat. Now you come crawling—the beautiful, honorable white man—and I can tell you to go to hell!”

The car had eaten up the three miles to Cholon. He looked out at the big paper lanterns and advertising pennons that streamed hyperbole from the shops lining the rutted streets. Undeterred as a ship making passage through a noisy sea, the car plowed through a turmoil of pedestrians flowing over from the narrow sidewalks. Some sauntered, some strode hurriedly, some ran—but few silently. Many were naked save for loincloths, their ease contrasting with the helmeted whites of commercial success. Kimonos were gayer against the black cotton tunics of older men and women. Babies abounded. Bazaars offered a *mélange* of silks, meat, wooden clogs, miniature trees, cheap purses, painted fans, melons, paper toys and flowers, fiber hats, dried roots, scrolls, fish sauce, brass jewelry, leather goods, sex aids, painted boxes, and herbs in dusty jars. Doors of opium cribs and brothels gaped like hungry mouths. “One night’s take of any of those joy palaces,” he thought grimly, “and I could answer her in spades.”

He took a deep breath of the damp, acrid air, determinedly relaxing his clenched hands. Well, if she had raised the money, at least he would get his fee from Louis. . . .

“So your combine is all set again? All right, show me your dough and I’ll get the cable off.”

“What good would that do?” she asked again. She had twisted away from him and was frowning at the littered street. “You didn’t think I would just sit still, did you, waiting for you to get less moral?” Her words were slow under a freight of misery and scorn. “Yesterday morning I sold the map. I didn’t get all I had to have of course—but I wired Hai, asking if he would take a note for the rest. Today he answered——”

“And?”

“The deal’s off—probably has been for days, only he never bothered to let me know. He got a better offer, and took it.”

After a minute he laughed shortly. When they started going wrong, they certainly went wrong the whole way!

The car stopped, and he saw that they were under the garish

lights of her building. Stepping out onto the sidewalk, he took her hand with an exaggerated flourish of assistance. But pleasure came so sharply into her face, warming the unhappiness from it, that he finished assisting her out onto the curb as courteously as though she had been Alix Savery.

"Well, you've had your fun," he told her as the machine pulled away. "And I've seen you to your door, like you wanted, while you were doing it. Besides, if Louis already had sold, there's no need to hold it against me for not breaking down sooner. So let's say good-by without any more snarls. It's not such a big world that we might not meet again sometime."

For a time she studied him without expression; then said slowly, "That money was important to you—yet you saw it go away, and took your beating without a squawk. And afterward you didn't hit back with the things you might have said, but treated me just like I'm as good as any of your friends." She began to smile a little. "You're all right, Mr. Shepherd."

"Shep."

Her eyes narrowed and she bit her lips a little. "I wish I'd given you the map."

"Given it to me? With it worth enough to be down payment on a load of booze?"

"Perhaps I made it seem overvaluable," she admitted. "If it will make you feel any better," as the beaded lashes tipped up, "I didn't intend to pay anything for that shipment, but to hijack it."

"As good as my friends!" with a bow. "You're better, Bijou—better!"

"Louis would have blamed you, y'know."

"Why worry about what didn't happen? But if you feel a favor coming on——"

"I only got a couple thousand piastres for it," she said, her face darkening again; "but I'm in no position to bargain." She indicated the café with a derogatory jerk of her thumb. "This cost me more than I thought it would, and I haven't been able to catch up. Otherwise"—her hands made a stubby gesture of regret—"I'd let you have what you need, and that's a fact."

"I'm sure you would, but forget it."

"I can, though, buy you a drink."

"Thanks, but——" Then over her shoulder he saw Joe, the manager, looking out at them through an aperture in the door. He remembered: ". . . to your profit."

"Well, one for the road."

When they approached the entrance Joe opened for them and backed into the foyer with a deep, respectful bow. Bijou answered it with a curt nod, starting up to the entresol. To Shepherd her silence seemed a form of rebuff; but, passing him, he saw an eyelid droop in Joe's impertinent face. As he took the stairs he mused that for a prospective business associate this one was very easy to dislike.

In her office Bijou removed her cloak and the glittering mokot. Unlocking a door behind the tall draperies, she led the way into a room completely covered, save for a ventilating outlet in the ceiling, with panels of close-woven straw. Threads of light from brass lamps revealed a cellarette and a large square couch with a pair of headrests. A tray of paraphernalia was on a table beside it.

"Will you have that drink or a pipe?"

"The drink. But I'll fix it—you go ahead."

She nodded and settled herself on the couch, facing the layout. "You'll find everything there. I need this—it's been a long day." While he put a highball together, she lighted a peanut-oil lamp and dug a yin-hok into a canister of prepared opium. Impaling a portion of the black, treacly substance, she twirled it on the dipper in the small flame. When she had made a soft pellet, she put it in a filigreed pipe, the bowl of which she then heated over one of the porcelain blocks. He watched in silence, until she had taken deeply of the heavy smoke.

"Bijou—if it'll make you feel any better, you're lucky not to get that shipment. I happen to know it's no more than bottled Mickey Finns."

Lifting the pipe, she regarded its ivory mouthpiece. "It isn't whisky in those cases, but something that'll kill a whole lot faster."

"What do you mean?"

"Bigger poison—weapons."

"But I sold it to Louis myself—through somebody else!"

She nodded. "He found out. That's why he came to you in Singapore—to save face. You would have been sticking your neck into real danger for him without knowing it—because he had your boxes repacked with matériel stolen from army dumps. Rifles, bullets, machine guns, hand grenades——" She put the pipe back to her lips.

Shepherd had a quick, cold thought of Inspector Duphaine.

"So that's it," he said after a pause. "But why the hitch, then? Can't the Viet Minh people pay?"

"The Viet Minh!" contemptuously. "They and their silly republic! What we want is a return of our ancient glory—when this country had a wealth and culture and dignity your shoddy democracies never could have! The monarchy!" she cried, her relaxation gone. "We were great under its rule—and every Cao-dist knows that we can be again!"

"You're talking like an idiot."

"Am I? It could be that our sect is stronger than you think! What if there is a coup——" She broke off, her mouth tightening.

"Don't worry," he told her, "I'm no informer. I just think you're misdirecting your energies, that's all."

"What do you know about how we feel?" she burst out again. "Our energies? We'd give our lives to be back in power again!"

When he answered his voice was cold. "The outs and the ins—the have-nots and the haves—it all comes down to position. Getting it or keeping it. Each side calling themselves patriots, and the other side bastards."

"What do you think, then—that nobody ever should do anything?" she asked in fierce scorn. "Just slide along, not caring, and end up with holes in his pants?"

"I guess I look that way to you," he said after a momentary pause. "For the record, though, I didn't say one shouldn't care—but about what." He frowned, inspecting his glass. "My helper is a Frenchman. They don't want him at home, but he still looks

on it and everything it stands for as his country. To Lem, France can do no wrong. He loves it. You hate it—and the Viet Nam too. Personally I think that they're going to get together for the good of all Indo-China. You don't see it that way. You want to bring back a form of government that died with those temples rotting out there in the bush. Why? Because you personally might have a better spot under it?"

"You can go now."

"All right—and I've already forgotten what you've said. So you needn't send anybody around to cut my throat."

She smiled minutely, once more picking up the yin-hok. "Yes, you're all right—Shep." She dipped the needle into the opium. "I hope you find that bank. Or why not try coming up on the right side of the elegant Mme. Savery? I'd say she's a possibility."

"Would you now?" he asked dryly, and left her.

The café was closed when he came down the stairs, its tables stacked and scrubwomen kneeling under work lights. But Joe was still in the foyer, checking a column of figures against a pile of papers on the reservation desk.

"Waiting for me?"

"No, just cleaning up." Sliding from his stool, he approached with an oblique smile. "You're leaving so soon?"

"It's later than you might think." Shepherd looked into the secretive eyes. "That possibility you mentioned—do you have anything yet?"

"Not yet—but maybe soon." He pulled open the door. "And when it shows it will be to your prof——"

"Yeh, so you said. Get me a cab, will you?"

"Right away." As he scurried out into the street, his cries high and demanding against the humid hush, a scout left a patch of shadow against the building and crossed the sidewalk to where Shepherd waited.

"Wanchee girl?"

"No wanchee."

"Wanchee boy?"

"Go on, beat it."

The pimp examined him querulously. "What wanchee?"

Shepherd glanced down at the pumpkin of puzzled face. Then he began to laugh.

XI

HE HAD BEEN throwing peanuts at the monkeys for an hour before Alix Savery arrived. She came to him without hesitation, smiling, hand outstretched. The other tanned arm was bent around a straw bag which matched her loose-brimmed hat. Fresh with flowers, it was bold against a figured dress made plausible only by her slim height. He saw that there were faint smudges beneath her eyes, but the rest of her face was clear and untouched, daring with a faint shine.

"My employer," he told her, "certainly is extraordinarily handsome."

She laughed, and the smudges disappeared. "Now there's a coincidence! I was thinking the same thing about my—employee."

Dropping her hand, he said, "Well, that takes care of that. Where can we talk?"

A slight frown of disappointment darkened the warmth of her expression. "I do hope that you are not going to be difficult. We can walk—find a bench," she answered his question. "We easily could have met by chance."

He tossed the last of the peanuts to the clamoring gray and black buffoons behind the wire screen and took her arm. They started along a walk made pleasant by gardenias and tuberose, gay with the clamor of birds.

"Difficult?" he said. "That depends. Wary—yes."

"Of whom? Paul?"

"No, he doesn't bother me. What does, is to have somebody on my side show a reason for distrust."

The gray eyes almost on a level with his came around swiftly. "Do you mean me, Mr. Shepherd?"

"You lied to me last night, didn't you?"

"Lied to you!" She stopped short, her cheeks whitening. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I." He pushed her rigid arm toward a bench beside the path. "Let's stop here. It's time you explained why you want me to believe your husband's a narcotic."

"Because he——"

"He's not!" flatly. "I know the symptoms. I doubt if he even smokes opium. No—whatever else he may be—he's no junky."

Her free hand moved in a little helpless gesture, and as he pulled her down beside him on the iron seat she submitted unresistingly. She looked down at her handbag, the deep red of embarrassment replacing her pallor. "I owe you an apology," she said in a shamed voice. "It was just that I thought it best to be—well, melodramatic. You're right, of course. Paul uses nothing."

"All right then—if that's not it, why are you afraid of him?" Recollection of her frenzied whispers on the terrace tugged at him bitterly. "Or are you? Was all of that last night just an act?"

"No! No!" she cried unhappily. "Oh, I know how I must seem to you—but I know so little of what you feel about certain things——"

He took a package of Marylands from his pocket. "Up to now you've been so busy getting me in your power," ironically, "and letting me know it—you've not seemed to care how I might feel about anything. What is it you didn't want to admit? A lover?"

"No, no—nothing like that. The only man who makes me want to get away is Paul himself." She took a breath and turned to him, her eyes worried and pleading. "He's a fascist."

He stared at her, through his mind tumbling into discard all the explanations she might have made. "A fascist!" he exclaimed, his voice lifting as though freed of some sullen ballast. "That's why you want to leave him?"

"Cannot you find that reason enough?"

"Why of course I can, you foolish creature!" He laughed so ringingly that a pair of colonial soldiers, promenading with Annamite girls, turned and smiled. "Why didn't you just say so!"

Refusing a cigarette, she put a grateful hand on his arm. "As I said, I don't know your position politically, or any other way.

I've had no way to judge. You might have felt about them as strongly as I do, and then again you might not. You are a man one cannot sum up easily, Mr. Shepherd," with a petitioning smile. "It could be easily possible that you might think as they do . . . or be infected with the more general corruption of the times—disinterest."

"I've been telling Inspector Duphaine about my failings on that score," he said; "but as for going along with them—give me credit for being smart enough to hate their guts."

"Thank God," she said softly. "The world is so mixed up—particularly here, where Vichyites were collaborating openly with the Jap—it is difficult to tell who has any decent beliefs left. I think you now can understand my concern," she explained. "If I had told you why I want so much to be quit of Paul—and you were not troubled by his ways, even sympathized with them—you might not have helped me. Indeed—you might have seen profit in blocking, rather than aiding, my escape."

"That's right," shortly, "you never can tell about a heel."

She smiled reprovingly. "You do see that I could not take the chance? Actually, I don't think I doubted you. There is something about you—to inspire a woman's confidence." She hesitated, looking toward the flowering trees. "In the University of Dijon there was a book I often drew from the library—pictures of knights of our great period of chivalry. When I saw you I thought of one of them—cynical, intelligently cruel, yet with a valor that I could almost feel beneath my hand on the page . . . " She paused again, with a small, deprecatory laugh. "I fear I was quite too romantic to be a very good student!"

"One of our writers," Shepherd told her, his chest constricting in a queer conspiracy against his breath, "one of the good ones—said that it's by the gift of romance that man is raised above the other animals. That goes for women as well, Alix. Don't lose it."

She heard him use her name without evident surprise. "I fear it is too late for that now. Despite all these years—and Paul—I guess I'm much the same inside." She smiled again, half apologetically. "Dreamy and—hopeful."

He laughed deep from a pervading happiness, his tension gone like blown smoke before the stimulation of her ineffable présence. He recalled his assumption that she had implied that a cell might be awaiting him. Doubtless what he had considered warnings from Duphaine and Paul Savery's menace were similar shadows—no more dangerous than her frightened phrases of the night before. "I'll bust something," he adjured himself grimly, "jumping to conclusions." Casting aside his cigarette, he leaned forward, elbows on knees, and told her to give him more facts.

"During the war Paul was a Vichyite," she answered readily. "That was common enough in these parts—but since, with people again arriving from home, they see their day ending. The Free French who fought, actively resisted, naturally enough have small use for those who didn't, and none at all for collaborationists. Paul knows that he must make a move. Until recently he has been uncertain as to just what—but the past few days I believe he has decided to try and give assistance to the Viet Minh people."

He straightened. "With them despising you—the French, that is—so much?"

"That is true, unfortunately. But then, their situation greatly needs aid, no matter where it comes from. Old Ho Chi-minh is a realist, and some believe he might be—appreciative as well. If our government wearies of the whole dreadful situation and yields the Viet Nam what they wish, Paul again might be—is it in a saddle?"

"An operator, isn't he?"

"Of the most maleficent type," she agreed unhappily; "yet thus far with a position here that to denounce him would be futile—and fatal. I could talk—he would be investigated, perhaps—then apologized to. And before long I would be dead."

"Yes, I guess you might be," he said, thinking of Savery's eyes. "Unless you made it stick."

"Actual proof? No, he is too sharp for any of those 'incriminating papers' so dear to the Intelligence. He talks—but what are words? In addition," as her shoulders lifted, "I have nothing

really wrong to tell of him now. They know his record, and thus far have passed it. It is what he may do for the Viet Minh which is actually treasonable."

"And that is?"

"A few days ago he sent a dupeur to Singapore with a large sum of money. I heard them in the study, with Paul explaining that it was for war surplus transport. A trifle shady, he admitted; a necessity these days, no? But later he came to my room, very high, and began to boast as he does when he has done something big——"

He came to my room, he found his mind repeating.

"—and I do not think it was automobiles at all!"

"More likely," he said, still thinking of that room, "it was a lot of arms a man named Louis Hai has got hold of."

She fell back against the bench, her eyes widening like gray caves. "How—how did you know?"

Unbelievably, he heard his warning signal sound. He looked down at his shoes, but not before he had seen apprehension entering her stunned amazement. "I just came from Singapore, y'know," he said, holding his voice casual. "That stuff's been kicking around there for a while."

"I will smoke now, please." Her fingers shook as she took the cigarette. "Then it is true—true!" Suddenly she whirled on him. "Now do you see why time is important? Now do you see we must move before"—she stumbled, plunged on—"more of my compatriots are caused to die in this forsaken land?"

"No doubt about it," he acknowledged quietly, "if that shipment gets in the hands of the Viet Nameese—or any guerilla bands like, say, the Caodists—government troops will have some extra trouble. But how are you going to stop it by running off to Siam? From there, you'd be believed even less than you might be here."

"Yes; that now is not any sort of solution." She had herself in hand again now. Letting the cigarette fall, she pressed the back of a hand against her forehead. "None at all. We must make more immediate plans."

The heat had strengthened with the rise of the midday sun,

burning the early moisture from the leaves of shrub and tree alike, and glossing them over with a febrile film. Birds chattered less in the oncoming quiet. The strollers yet on the paths were walking a bit more purposefully, as if answering an understood summons to preluncheon apéritifs under the awnings of Rue Catinat.

"What do you suggest?"

Opening her bag, she took out a small parcel. Gold and colored stones gleamed faintly through the tissue-paper wrapping. "As soon as you have disposed of these"—she dropped the package into a pocket of his jacket without looking at him—"you must leave for Pnom-Penh."

"Yes?"

"Paul and I are going up tomorrow. The Engs—those Cambodians you met last night—have invited us to a gala. There will be ceremonial dances you could have heard about, so you will have a reason also to be there this week. With us all staying at the same hotel—the Royal Palace—we will have opportunities to talk more." Her voice was quick and brisk with assurance.

"You seem to have discounted that I might refuse."

Her slender brows pulled together. "But why, after what you have said, should I——"

"You hired me, you will remember, to get you to Bangkok. Yes, I said I disapprove of men such as you claim your husband is. But what makes you think that I might care to interfere with—his business projects?"

She arose gracefully. "Because, as you observed last evening, you are on the hook."

"I thought so. I just wanted to hear you say it."

"Well," steadily. "I have said it."

"And you think you can keep me there?"

"I believe so."

"What if I were to say you gave me that clip?"

"Such a valuable gift to a veritable stranger?" She shook her head. "I have not the reputation to sustain any such action. You would merely gain my husband's—shall I say?—additional

dislike. And even if you claimed that you found it, I do not believe you would care for what might happen."

"No?"

"No. Of course, I do not think it would be so drastic as the penal colony on Poulo-Condor. But the whole contretemps would cause an investigation, and . . ." She looked off with a shrug.

"We seem to arrive at a lot of similar conclusions." He stood, and the jewels bumped lightly against his leg. "Well, I've got it all straight now. For a time there I was sort of off the beam."

"Mr. Shepherd!" Her fingers gripped hard on his arm. "I told you that I was desperate. Now I am even more so. If you hesitate to be a—a good knight, and assist me in preventing this tragedy . . . then yes, I must force you to it! Fail me, and I will go to the police."

"That won't be necessary." As her face cleared relievedly he tapped his pocket. "Before I start, though, I'll have to use part of this to take care of a few miscellaneous charges."

"Charges," she asked, smiling a little, "like your rather—extravagant little friend?"

"I'll see you in Pnom-Penh."

The smile she gave him contained the same friendliness of their meeting. "I'm counting on it."

"I make mistakes," he said, taking her extended hand. "I suggested meeting you at the monkey cage. I should have said the tiger enclosure."

"Au revoir, Mr. Shepherd."

Her graceful figure moved off against a background of the gleaming foliage. The light skirt floated gently around the long, trim legs. Her well-held shoulders, the flat hips, were those of a young cadet; yet from the top of her swaying hat to the high-spiked heels of her trim shoes there was to be no doubt but that she presented the essence of complete femininity. Yes, he thought grimly, his employer certainly was extraordinarily handsome.

XII

THE PAWNBROKER switched on an examination lamp. Breaking open the paper covering, he slid a necklace, a bracelet, and a pair of earrings out on the velvet-topped table which edged into his heavy abdomen. The matched set glittered promisingly beneath the searching eye of light.

"You have been a kind husband," he said politely, touching each piece with a fingernail like a polished moonstone. "I trust that your wife will not suffer too greatly in loaning these evidences of a generous spirit."

"Her regret is endless," Shepherd answered. "To every sea, however, there comes a squall. In our case, such a never-to-be-forgotten disturbance is upon us. Thus I have come to you again—confident that in the combination of your keen eye and honest heart will rest an answer to this instance of the perplexities of an inconsiderate world."

Through the tortoise-shell rings of his glasses the Chinese regarded him approvingly. "Permit me, Mr. Maloney . . ." His fat palms slapped together like a shot. "The pleasure I find in your manner persuades me to hope that you may join me in a cup of tea?"

Shepherd bowed and, leaning back in the teak chair, let his gaze move over the cases that walled the room. "If one must live, where better to pass his time than among objects of such surpassing loveliness? Your taste, good Tuey Fung, is exquisite as the first song of the lark. May I hope that your customers have the wisdom to appreciate it?"

The pawnbroker inclined as deeply forward as his bulk would permit. "These few poor treasures are my friends. It brings me an undeserved pleasure to find them appreciated—as well as to hear, Mr. Maloney, a transaction approached with the forms of cultured usage. It is a rare occasion. The French"—he sighed—"they are a funny race."

"They fight with their feet."

With a snicker Tuey Fung said, "I like Americans."

A boy brought in a tray and placed it a few inches from the flashing heap between them. The host gravely poured an aromatic tea into cups like oversize, translucent thimbles. As his sausage fingers passed one to Shepherd, he continued: "Once it was my privilege, unable to be sure, to hold a chair of romance languages at Yenching University. Due to the nature of our endowment, I met many Americans at Peiping, in addition to many of my young countrymen who studied in your great land. There is some undecipherable magnificence in that blessed soil which causes those who tread it to achieve decisions not activated by mind or colon. The heart, that impulsive muscle? I do not know. That of which I am sure, my dear Mr. Maloney, is that yours is the hope of the world."

Frowning, Shepherd put down his cup. "Tuey Fung—your attitude prompts me to an outrageous presumption. Return the piece of jewelry which so fortunately brought us together, and allow me to give you a note for what I owe you. In due course I will settle the debt—with, of course, the appropriate charges." His breath held while the pawnbroker again tasted delicately of his tea, then carefully replaced the cup in its waferlike saucer.

"Mr. Maloney," he sighed, "is there some—error about that transaction? On this one?"

Shepherd heard a last door close. "None whatsoever," he said with a trace of hurt. "Your skilled eye has perceived that the items of pledge are of the finest quality—and I have permission to put them in your discreet care. I was merely—well, you mentioned that my wife might be distressed to be parted from them, even temporarily. I am afraid your discernment sprinkled the salt of truth in the wound of necessity."

Tuey Fung made a gesture of apologetic regret. "I had, of course, no other thought. But as to your request, were obliging it in my power my answer could carry a different phrase. This establishment is not mine alone, however, and so I am forced to do business in an orthodox manner—the weary procedure of collateral against cash. I am sorry."

"Pray give it no more thought," Shepherd said, thinking how much sorer he would be if the police called for the collateral without returning the cash. "Women must take the sweet with the bitter."

"Your kindness of the past, I am sure, will sustain your wife in this momentary disappointment. Moreover, I will do my best to help ease the difficulty which so unfairly besets you—with ten thousand piastres."

Shepherd returned his smile. "To a man of your attainments, baubles such as these have a proper valuelessness. But the tides of trade wash steadily upon the shores of economic fact. In marts I have no wish to visit, it is my opinion they would fetch twenty thousand piastres."

"I like Americans," the pawnbroker said again. "I would not have so charming a representative demean himself by dealing with those who might not sympathize with his plight. I will risk the wrath of my associates." He frowned, Alexander before Opis. "Twelve thousand."

"Eighteen, at the very least."

"In the immortal phrase of Li Tai Po . . ."

Cholon lay inert when, in a nimbus of final compliments and with fifteen thousand piastres in his pocket, Shepherd came out onto the sweltering street. Ricksha men slept in the thin shade under their vehicles. Piles of fruit, vegetables, and fish neglected by the morning's purchasers exhaled a steamy breath of decomposition from huckster barrows. Most of the stores were shuttered. This was his farewell appearance in this quarter, he hoped, rousing his driver with a demand to get out of it as soon as possible. If Alix Savery wanted her jewelry back, she could come over and get it; for him, Cholon had become too disagreeable a stew of stinks, heat, noise, pawnshop haggings, and disappointments from Bijou, the poverty-stricken plotter.

The air was cooler along the river, although not lively enough to fill sails which hung like tattered gallows birds above its mucous sheen. He lit a cigarette against the knout of decay lashing up from the banks. A gunboat trudged laboriously behind a mustache of dirty foam—in from delivering prisoners to

Poulo-Condor? The rag-doll seamen strewn along its rail wheeled his thoughts back to the rushing, laughter-filled cars of a paper chase; victorious cries following wails about chicanery out over Lake Michigan—a search through a sleeping city for a French sailor's pompommed hat, a million years ago.

"When I was young," he said.

The driver turned with an inquiring look, but he gave it no notice—nor, back at the hotel, did he observe a similar expression Lem brought to the tub of tepid water in which he lay, suspended and remote.

"What, Shep? Something happened?"

"Some money. A pleasant change."

"Dieu merci, so it is plans you make!" He dropped onto the toilet seat, his forehead latticed with eagerness. "We are rolling again?"

"Yes—maybe even as far as Chicago."

"Chicago! After all that you said?"

Shepherd nodded, squinting at his toes. "I wonder how Peggy'd like it there?"

"I would, Shep! I would if you would!"

"Better than Paris?"

"Paris might still be unwise," with a regretful sigh. "It was a long time ago, of course; but dossiers do not crumble with time." Suddenly his gaze jerked around, with fright in it. "You are not thinking that I might prefer to go where you would not be?"

"No, no, I was just asking. Y'never know." He grinned at the anxious eyes pleading in the seamed, drooping face. "I might run into something like the Serb, even in Chicago."

"The Serbian!" Lem was on his feet, suddenly light and co-ordinated as a boy athlete, choking on shrill lumps of laughter, a knife magically in his hand. "In and yet in, I could not find his life, that monster of a pork barre!" The blade was driving in bright, parallel flashes. "So certain I was that you were dead, my aim was all apart like an old sock! By my grandmother, when at last I found the place he was cut half——"

Shepherd reared up, yelling, "Put that thing away! Get rid of it! We're through with all that stuff, do you hear?" he heard

himself add; then brushed away his surprise with a sharp "And that's final!"

The knife disappeared as swiftly as it had appeared. "Sure, sure, as you say, Shep." He sat down again, his legs drawn apologetically together. "It is just that together we have had experiences one does not easily forget."

"Sometimes you scare me," Shepherd said, sinking back into the water. "With that toad stabber in your hand you look ten years younger."

"Now that is funny," Lem told him after a moment, "very funny. Suddenly I realize that exactly about you. When there is a lutte—notably a bad one with the chances not good—you become like a fighter who likes the going hard, as though refreshed by it, and happy." He shrugged. "That is, so it was, with you. Lately you do no more than look—look——"

"Maybe I'm slowing up." He got irritably out of the tub, and as Lem leaped forward with a towel yanked it from him.

"You have changed"—Lem's voice was mournful—"it is almost like we are no longer friends." He went so desolately through the door that Shepherd's scowl deepened before it dissolved. Taking a robe from the rack, he trailed him into the living room.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to bark at you. It's just—oh, to hell. Work on my back a little, will you?" he asked, dropping face down on the divan.

The little man's despondent lethargy fled as promptly as had his anxiety of a few minutes before. "Sure, sure!" His hands already outstretched, he hurried to the couch and knelt. "But you feel like a statue!" as he dug happily into the pads of muscle hillocking across their heavy supports. "To be so tied up is not like you, Shep. You are worried about something?"

"It's all right now—we've some green. Not a lot, but enough for our bill here, and to get us to Shanghai."

"Ah, wonderful! It will be good to see the old Bund once more!"

"The thing is this—I have to go up to Pnom-Penh—a couple hundred kilometers or so up north for a few days, maybe more."

"Yes, yes?"

"That clip we took over to the hock shop was an advance against a job. This morning I got more. So I have to go up there and stall along until I can either come through, raise enough to redeem, or find a hole to duck out of it."

"Then it might be—tough?"

"I won't know until later. It might be—with no contacts here, and Duphaine rooting around."

"So what if it is?" in a voice so anticipatory that Shepherd twisted a grin up at him.

"You sound like that would suit you fine."

"It would be like the old times! You and me against everybody! When do we start?"

Shepherd put his forehead back on his arms. "I'll have to do it alone, Lem. I'm leaving most of the money here with you," he added as the hands stilled on his shoulders. "I want you to get Peggy to Shanghai as soon as possible."

"Peggy!" bitterly.

"Book passage for all three of us. I may be able to be back in time to make it with you—but get her away. I'll meet you at the Cathay as soon as I can."

"You—still don't trust me, Shep?"

Pushing himself up, Shepherd drew on the robe. "Giving you my money and my girl to take care of—what's it sound like? Do you know anybody else I'd trust that much?"

"But I want to be with you—where things are happening."

"Your job is at this end." But though he rubbed his head Lem would not yield his gloomy look, asking:

"Why can't she go alone, for instance?"

"Because dames get into trouble so easy, for instance! Anything can happen to them, you know that! Besides, there isn't anything you can do. On this one, I mean," at his stricken look. "And if it goes sour, I may have to make a fast break."

"I've been fast on other ones."

Shepherd stifled his impatience. "We're in French country—no place for you to have that passport of yours looked into closely. No, it's better I go solo, don't you see?"

"Whatever you say."

"That's more like it. That's my old Lem."

"But if you do need me," he persisted, "you'll let me know?"

"Of course. And listen! Don't tell Peggy until just before sailing date. If she has time to think, there's no telling what she'll come up with. So just say nothing."

Lem nodded grudgingly. "Whatever you say," he said again, scowling; but as Shepherd began to placate him with comic reminiscences, his outrage lifted. Presently his disappointment also diminished, soon to be replaced by the adoring glee that always accompanied a reaffirmation of his oneness with the life for which, no more than asked, he would have given his own. By the time of Peggy's arrival he was chuckling contentedly, his irks and fears allayed.

"What's up?" she wanted to know, dividing an appraising glance between them. "You look like a p-pair of robbers who've j-just heard of a new stagecoach."

"And you look like a frisky kitten," Shepherd told her. "How do you do it in this heat?"

"A bunny," from Lem. "A bouncy little bunny. Youth."

"A cat, a r-rabbit—and Dracot just said I sang like a b-bird. Maybe I'm a m-menagerie, and not a tired jane who just got herself a j-job."

"So that's where you've been? Honey, that's swell!"

She smiled proudly. "I start tomorrow. The d-dancer there's already on notice. S-so she'll be closed tonight. Too b-bad—she's good."

"Not very," he said, and then hastily, "I wish I could be on tap for your opening, but I have to run up to Pnom-Penh. That friend of mine," as she stiffened, "you know, the one I borrowed from? He's there. It means another loan, so——"

"But I've got this job n-now!"

"We'll need more than that, sweetie."

She scowled, then suddenly asked, "That appointment you had the other n-night over in Cholon—is it the s-same friend?"

"Nothing came of that. This will be different, though. Don't worry."

"Why shouldn't I?" Dropping into a chair, she put out her feet and watched them tap together. "When the Saverys are going to be there too."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Paul took m-me over to the Casino to see Dracot. He t-told me just now, when he d-dropped me off."

"So it's Paul now, is it?"

"Oh, shut up!" She looked up at him, her face pulled into a pink knot of disapproval. "Then you d-didn't know they're going? That skinny Alix d-didn't say?"

"Peg, honest—sometimes you sound like a D.A.!"

She sighed. "All right, go ahead. B-but remember I warned you about them, that's all. You probably won't, though—men b-being fools l-like they are."

Shepherd turned to Lem, but there was no support in the peculiar look on the old malfeator's face.

XIII

THIS was where, in the fifteenth century, the determined Lady Penh drew ashore a floating yao tree and found three buddhas in its hollow trunk. Was it not a sign from the gods that the capital of Cambodia should be moved here from Angkor the Great? Her intuition prevailed—and so eventually it came to pass that what had been a swampy river junction became the royal seat.

Yet even she might not have fancied how, in a brief five hundred years, the city which took her name was to appear. There would be certain familiar landmarks to certify that it was the same site—notably the river from which she had pulled her impressive discovery, and the same ageless hill overlooking it, now crowned by a temple and sleek with lawns, trees, and gardens. But the commemorative statuary which also helped to landscape it would have puzzled her—a colored group of one King Sisowath

on his throne in full coronation dress, dancing girls beside him and a soldier waving a Tricolor over his crown. And even had the grandiloquent inscription on an identifying column beside the display been in her language rather than French, she would have found difficulty in understanding its meaning—that by grace of the protection of the French Republic the kingdom of Cambodia had in 1907 regained its national heritage.

Still, she would have taken fresh assurance in the public museum of Khmer antiquities, where images from the great buildings at Angkor rested in the calm beauty of imperishable bronze. Then there was the pink-white bulk of a sacred elephant stabled near an enormous fanfare of flaring roofs, silver spires, and pagodaed towers. His presence would indicate that this was the royal palace, although its dainty extravagances gave it more the appearance of a huge exercise in confectionery than the headquarters of a properly fierce and respected king.

Inside, however, she would have found final proof of the incumbent's lineage: the Crystal Buddha with its gold pedestal and five symbolic parasols, and the man-size, diamond-inlaid Gold Buddha; the Holy Sword of Indra—unsheathed twice yearly by its chaplain-keepers, descendants of the Brahmin clergy; the hereditary plate, ornaments, weapons, and vestments for ceremonies to be presided over by the ranking representatives of the sects of Vishnu and Siva.

These regal trappings she would have recognized, but other items of the household might have increased the doubt brought on by the gingerbread quality of the buildings. Such a profusion of red plush carpeting and gilded chairs! So many cases of jeweled trifles—timepieces, rings, snuff containers, spitting basins, medals, toys, scepters, music boxes, chains, cardcases, gongs, teapots, soup bowls, ruby-studded harness—which seemed more pertinent to a fairy-tale ruler than an active one, like gifts tossed into a painted cage to divert a jaded and rather silly prisoner.

The Chinese quarter could not have seemed strange to Lady Penh; it was characteristic with life pursued changelessly. But in the European sector her sense of recognition would have ended. There had been nothing in her time with which to compare the

official and office buildings, the luxury hotels and suburban villas of the pink people who dwelt therein. Now she must face the correctness of her surmise about the king in the palace; he was but a figurehead, and these the true rulers. For growing in its environs were two plants which the newcomers had come to worship, with the necessity of control—a tall, broad-leafed tree, and the climbing shrub that had provided spice for the food of her day as well. Rubber and pepper, Lady Penh soon would have realized, had wrought changes upon the civilization she knew quite as drastic as those of the Siamese sword.

Of course so wise a person would have admitted that to citizens of a comfort-accepting age the mutations of time had compensations. Unlike the traditional games of the past, defeat on the tennis courts at the Sporting Club carried no accompaniment of injury, death, or disgrace. The keystone arch allowed big rooms and wide windows unknown to the architecture of her period. Lead pipe made cleanliness convenient. And refinement in distillation and attitude had caused the drinking of intoxicating beverages to become a social rite rather than an aid to religious ones.

If Lady Penh (perhaps confused by the name) had entered the Royal Palace Hotel she would have found a typical enjoyer of these latter-day benefits. In a room allotted to the pastime he was imbibing a mixture of gin, wine, and gentian bitters. Occasionally he would fill his lungs with the smoke of a burning weed; this was a practice held to furnish relaxation or stimulation, as required. Awkward garments bound his limbs, a belt encircled his middle, a collar choked his neck. He was looking through the window at the hill in the center of town, squinting against the combined glare of these mirrored walls and the pavement and close-barbered grass outside. Withal, she might well have excused the lack of interest with which he was viewing her pnom.

“Encore on the martini——”

As a servitor in robes even more uncomfortable than his patron's started to prepare a fresh potion, a slight draft sighed across the glittering box. The shade of the Lady of Penh, sighing

for another chance to let that log go floating uninterrupted down to the sea?

The liquor was moving through him pacifyingly. He felt himself loosening up in a way he liked, open and flexible for anything to come. He noted the alchemy with gratitude; thus far today tension had diminished the enjoyment he ordinarily would have found in a trip that started with a dawn-tinted ride through miles of rice fields and orderly rubber plantations. What he had seen of Pnom-Penh's parks and archaically styled buildings, its streets jostling with rickshas, pony-drawn busses, motorcars and native vehicles like matchboxes on wheels, were invitations to loiter. But, stemming his curiosity, he had ordered the driver directly on to the hotel. An interesting city it might be—but first he must know what Alix Savery had in mind.

Yet try as he would to keep his thoughts from fingering it, they resolutely kept returning to the puzzle. It was, he found, provoking. Ordinarily he avoided much guesswork about impending incidents. Conjecture fought against improvisation, drained off the creative impulse, took away the joy of riding the spur of the moment. "There's no percentage," he once had put it to a worried Lem, "in leaving your fight in the gymnasium."

His impatience found an outlet when he saw Mr. Eng hurrying toward the reception desk. Signing his chit, he started across the lobby toward the lift. The dapper Cambodian, carefully wiping his face with a silk handkerchief, recognized him at once.

"Bon jour, Mr. Shepherd!"

"Oh, hello——"

"We met at the house of M'sieur Savery, you may recall?"

"Of course I do. Hearing you talk, how could I forget?"

Eng beamed as they shook hands. "It is a favor of you to say so. My wife contends that when I have had a bit to drink I shoot too much off at the mouth."

"To the contrary, it was most enlightening."

"Thank you again. You are joining the Saverys?"

"Why—are they here?"

"Not as yet, but I am expecting them for a few days' visit. How fortunate that you will be here at the same time!"

"Isn't it? No, I'm not with them—just another tourist in your nice town."

"Ah, thank you once more. You are here at a fortunate time, and perhaps I may have the pleasure of making it even more interesting. Several events have been arranged, including a reception at the palace. I have obtained cards for the Saverys. Perhaps you also might care to join the party?"

"I'd like to. Our friends are expected today?"

"Yes; they should be here now, in fact. Since they did not arrive this morning, it must be that they awaited the passage of the noonday heat before making a start. Still," with a slight frown, "I wish they had informed me of the delay. Unforeseen—ah—unpleasantries may occur on roads in the less populated areas. Did you, ah . . . ?"

"Nothing but a driver who must have been trained on a racecourse," Shepherd assured his anxious look. "He seemed in an awful hurry to deliver me and get back to Saigon."

"They like to return before night. Of course," hastily, "everything is so rapidly coming under control, even in isolated districts, that one need not feel concern. Nevertheless, I do wish they would appear," he added with an honest sigh.

"You mean they might be attacked?"

"Oh no!" Eng quickly reapplied the handkerchief to his face. "Things now are perfectly safe! Why, we even will have the hotel at Angkor open in a few days! It merely happens that M'sieur Savery—how shall I say it?—may not be fully appreciated by some of my more thoughtless countrymen—wild fellows who do not have an appreciation for the French which the rest of us sustain. Rarities of course, but—"

"I'd say he can take care of himself pretty well in any company."

"True—true! So powerful a man, so fine a shot—there is no cause for alarm. Quite none!"

"A fine shot, you say?"

"Certainment! One of the best! Of this you did not know?"

Shepherd moved his head. "It seems there are always new things to learn about Paul Savery. But while you're waiting—how about an *apéritif*?"

Glancing at his watch, Eng smiled apologetically. "It would be my pleasure to invite you, but there is a small chore to perform. In addition to my other duties I am," with modest vanity, "a courtier at the palace. I must look in on a rehearsal of the royal ballet."

"That shouldn't be a chore."

Eng hesitated, then said, "Perhaps you might care to join me? To view these modern versions of the *Apsaras* is something of an unusual nature."

"It appeals to mine, all right, but——"

"We will not be long, and then a return here for a sundowner. By that time the Saverys should have arrived, don't you think?"

He was so obviously disturbed that something might have happened to his influential friends, and so undesirous of being left alone with the prospect, that Shepherd found himself saying, "Okay, I'll come. But stop fretting—you said he was a good shot, didn't you?"

Eng recoiled slightly from the edge on his voice. "Oh, his reputation as a hunter is quite familiar, yes." Through their gold frames his eyes were puzzled and alarmed, as if he feared that he had not been handling himself with diplomatic correctness. He rubbed his face again and said with conciliatory hopefulness, "If it is your pleasure also, perhaps you two may do some shooting while you are here."

Shepherd laughed so harshly that the clerk looked over at them. "Who knows? But meantime let's go look at the girls."

"Ah, splendid! Thank you!" He smiled, somewhat apprehensively, and they went out to a tiny Citroën parked near the front steps.

The continuing heat had cleared the business section. Automobiles and *boîtes à allumettes* were scarce even toward the river front. Only the rickshas—puller, fare, and vehicle like a doomed beast in flight—were unable to escape the burning streets. They left the car on Rue du Palais, outside the court-

yard. A tiny breeze twitched the plumes on liveried guards at the gates, but within was a humidity so oppressive that Shepherd felt it could have been handled with ice tongs.

A gallery frescoed with epic illustrations bordered the enclosure. In opposite corners across from the front of the principal building were the Salle des Fêtes and the Salle des Danses. Following Eng toward the latter, he glanced covetously up the marble steps of the palace, to where a gable of caryatids supported a deck of superimposed roofs over an inviting veranda.

In the dim pavilion the royal chorus was interpreting an episode from the Ramayana, the same poem depicted on the walls outside. Uncostumed, their faces free of the chalky mask of formal presentation, the backs and underarms of their practice clothes dark with sweat, at first they seemed like any chorus in a work session, even to the rhythmic activity of their jaws.

But as his eyes became accustomed to the sweltering shadows he saw how extremely young they were, and that they were chewing the tooth-staining betel. Noting how closely they watched him from behind the bored absorption of their movements, he recalled that these were palace girls. To lives circumscribed from babyhood by its cloister he actually was the novelty! Eng eyed him nervously when his grin broke through their demure reserve and they giggled.

The dance, lifted by a crescendo from the orchestra of drums and xylophones, sprang to a climax. Then the pulse died out of the music, and the tiny figures crumpled on the polished floor. There was a sharp command. Chattering like gunfire, spitting jets of red-stained saliva, the ballerinas herded toward the exit to their quarters, variously darting back looks of interest, amusement, irritation, or childish lasciviousness.

As the concert mistress approached, Shepherd saw that she did not welcome his presence, and he drew back while she talked with Eng. When they had finished she bowed to them both, disapprovingly, and hurried off in the wake of her charges. The courtier, now regretting this invitation as clearly as had Taras his tip at the track, ushered him quickly back to the courtyard and through the gates.

In the car Shepherd looked at him with a grin. "Did the old hen think I was going to grab one of her chicks?"

"Oh no—it is just that she is rather old-fashioned. She does not believe her charges should be observed by foreign eyes."

"Particularly without their make-up."

"Why yes—how did you know?"

"Show people are all the same. They don't like to be watched, going through their labor pains."

"But these are scarcely show people, would you say?" with a trace of stiffness.

"That's right," Shepherd said, "so they're not. Well anyway, I hope the boss lady doesn't complain to yours about my being there. It seems your friends from Saigon are causing you nothing but trouble."

Eng protested deprecatingly, but it was evident that he was concerned over the consequences of his indiscretion, nor did his alarm lift until they found Paul Savery in the hotel bar.

"M'sieur Savery!" he cried relievedly. "So you are safe!"

Savery gave him a patient glance over a glass of beer. "Were you thinking we might have been slaughtered by your impassioned compatriots?"

A flush entered the Cambodian's golden skin. "Ah no! I felt some trouble with the machine might have delayed you, but assuredly none from those ruffians who, I beg to state, are not compatriots of mine."

"Hello, Shepherd. What are you doing here?"

"Oh—sight-seeing."

"Sight-seeing," with a grunt. "Well, if that's what you like, I guess you'll find it here. Eng been showing you around?"

"Enough to wet my whistle. Have a drink with us?"

"Join me. I am waiting until my wife gets unpacked. One might think we were catching the Orient Express." His face was mauve with heat, his tone petulant. While they drew up chairs he eyed Shepherd speculatively, as though deciding between the profit of further inquiry or the luxury of saying something nasty.

"I was telling Mr. Shepherd how you indulge in le chasse," Eng put in quickly.

"He also told me that you're good," Shepherd said, thinking that the Cambodian must be forging along handily at the palace. "What do you use?"

"Bolt-action Mauser."

"30-06 or 300 H and H?"

The beadiness was softening from Savery's eyes. "375 Magnum, mostly. The bigger game in this country is strong. It does not kill much below 400 kilogrammeters.

"That's a lot of impact. Unless your placement is right."

"My placement is quite right," softly. "You would like to see, perhaps?"

"I haven't any weapons." He called the waiter, but Savery gave the order and leaned forward across the thick fold of his arms, his gaze brightening with anticipation.

"I can arm you. Beside the all-around gun I brought two express rifles and a little 16-gauge, just in hope to get out."

Shepherd hesitated. "How far out? Is there stuff near here, or do you have to make camp?"

"Very near. It will not interfere with your sight-seeing," with an astonishingly friendly smile. "Surely you are not so anxious to get back to our little Peggy that you cannot work in a bit of sport?" He laughed, his lips pulling back on short, even teeth. "The manager here has a truck. We can start in the morning and be back in time for luncheon. Allons-nous-en!"

"Why don't you, Mr. Shepherd?" Eng asked. "It might be a time of true excitement."

XIV

THE TRUCK crept ahead, growling along like a big animal in his own jungle. There was enough illumination for the driver to retain the soft road without headlights. The tail gate had been

lowered and chained out level with the floor of the chassis. On it the hunters stood, grasping the handrail of a waist-high platform which provided a rest for their guns. Electric lamps were fixed to their helmets. As their heads turned beams swept each side of the gallery of velvet shadows, searching for twin reflections that would be game poised to watch their passage.

They had traversed, Shepherd judged, about fifty miles. The jolting inactivity was beginning to bore him; this was no more sport than the scorned use of aircraft to chase antelope across African plains. Wide-awake, impressive in full khaki and hobnailed boots, Savery had come to his room while it was still black—to criticize his brief outfit and offer a loan of more suitable clothes. But he had stubbornly held to the shorts, the elbow-cropped shirt, that now were making him prey to increasing attack from insects. Why, he pondered, had it seemed so distasteful to wear anything of his partner's except the topee light? Why had he preferred to go incorrectly dressed rather than have Savery return to the room where Alix lay sleeping?

Hurrying him through a breakfast of croissants and bitter coffee, Savery had taken a package of lunch from the cook and gone out to kick sleep away from the driver. Soon off the road behind the hotel, an hour later they had reached this endless arcade, with Savery even more impatient than he had been at the start. There was a reason:

Near Kompong Cham, Shepherd had identified a crashing and grunting as a stray pig. He held fire, but just before the animal disappeared Savery had jumped from the carrier, his rifle blasting at the screening bush. Plunging into it, he had returned a few minutes later, downcast and profane. It had been, he claimed, a wild boar with a fine set of tusks—and why, he demanded, hadn't Shepherd taken his shot? "Am I out with a poor eye?"

"And am I out with a hot gun?" Shepherd returned, all his irritations—lack of sleep and fortifying food, the blanketing heat, mosquitoes, and this tiresome ride—synthesized by the jibe. "Why don't you pepper some of these shadows? They might be tiger."

Savery stiffened, his lips hardening. Then, as abruptly, he reached inside the car and brought out a bottle of cognac with the cork already loosened. Taking a collapsible cup from his pocket, he filled it and held it out in a sulkily gesture of propitiation. Half ashamed of his outburst, Shepherd took a quick swallow. Savery drained off the rest, smashed the cup shut, and ordered the driver on.

For the next hour they had ridden in silence. Savery had kept the brandy on deck beside the guns. After Shepherd's second refusal he did not proffer it again, but took occasional drinks straight from the bottle, silent, his back turned, the cyclops eye on his forehead steadily raking the vine-festooned trees.

The jungle was becoming a paler green, less tightly packed. As they lurched around a bend in the track a tiny hut showed in a clearing. Savery yelled to the driver and the truck stopped. When his voice again struck at the treetops a man stood up from a clump of bushes. At Savery's command he approached, a wiry little Cambodian in singlet and sampot. He listened attentively to the ejaculations which poured from Savery, looking at the ground as if accepting full responsibility for their failure to encounter game. But in a momentary pause in the flood of whirling words he raised his hands wide from the sides of his head.

"K'tin?"

With a cry Savery leaped down at him, questions popping like firecrackers. Then, hot with eagerness, he looked up at Shepherd, licking at a taut smile.

"Gaur! He saw gaur yesterday! Near here."

"Gaur?"

"By St. Hubert, you drive me mad! The aristocrat of all bovidae! One of the finest mammals still on earth! Mon dieu, who does not know of him!" Pushing the native into the truck with the driver, he sprang up on the tail gate, and as the car lurched forward he particularized the prize in bursts of anxious praise—describing the coat that changed from reddish in youth to almost black in maturity, and the horns that developed from orange to

plum color—dwelling on the strength and nimbleness which made a gaur so difficult that, although a grown bull averaged six feet at the withers, he was seldom taken by even the fabulous Fernand Millet, Indo-China's greatest hunter.

When the guide indicated where they would leave the road, he snatched up the Magnum Mauser and was off the machine before it stopped moving.

Shepherd followed immediately with an express rifle. The light was sufficient to disclose that they were entering a thorny green wall, but Savery's passion to meet this elusive adversary was contagious. Strongly infected, he shouldered into the thicket, careless of his flimsy protection against the thorns and snags that reached up in immediate antagonism.

The Cambodian moved rapidly, light as deer. For three miles of the sharply obstructed pace he scarcely managed to keep him in sight. He could hear Savery, deployed to his right, breathing in labored rasps. His own lungs were burning like a bank of coals. More bothersome, streams were bringing sand into his low shoes to grind at his stockings. A smarting heel meant that a hole already had sprung in the soft wool. It was with active relief that he saw their little bare-legged leader stop, a beckoning hand up.

Savery plunged silently forward and bent over the sign. Then he straightened and retraced his steps, the magazine rifle held rigidly across his chest. His face was working.

"Banteng," he said quietly. "Wild ox. Same family, but not gaur. Not at all. And the print is two, three days old."

As he passed, going back the way they had come, Shepherd had a closer look at his eyes. They were murderous. It was clear why Savery had not spoken to the guide, nor looked his way since the reading; he visibly was restraining himself from replacing the hoped-for target with a real one.

The Cambodian also must have felt the temptation radiating from him, for suddenly he was gone from the landscape as completely as the phantom quarry. Turning after his companion, Shepherd realized that for the first time he liked him a little.

By the time he reached the truck, reversed for the return trip, flies were clouding around the blood that squashed in his shoes. Holding his limp down, he racked his weapon and sat down on the tail gate to ease his burning feet. As they retraced the road snorts and curses tumbled from Savery, blowing his disappointment higher with the cognac bottle. But it was not for a half hour that the first shot reported down on Shepherd's head like a mallet. The car stopped at once. In the echoing silence he saw a monkey fall from a high branch. He glanced up inquiringly.

Savery, breaking the 12-gauge and replacing the shell, shrugged. "Are we to burn no powder at all?"

"Monkeys—with a shotgun?"

"To test the carry, of course. It has been so long since I shot small game I had almost forgotten what a pattern this old girl holds." Raising the gun, he rubbed its stock lovingly against his nose. "Come up and try her."

"Allezi!" Shepherd called to the driver. "And keep allezing!"

But it soon was apparent that Savery either actually was a hot gun, drunk, or crazed by the gaur failure. The cannonading went on intermittently in blasts of varying strength as he alternated his arms against any ordinarily by-passed objective among the lightening trees. Monkeys, fowl, or random small ground creatures were the measure of his deepening disgrace. Then he brought down a brace of cranes with a snap cross shot. As they floundered in their pool, iridescent with death in the shallow water, Shepherd came to his feet.

"Okay, that's enough."

"Oui, oui! Most okay placement!" He held out the rifle. "There will be others soon—see if you can do so well, no?"

"No. And no more for you, either."

"You mean," truculently, "that I am to cease shooting?"

"Like this, yes."

Savery understood him now. His mouth closed, and some of the frenzy went out of the eyes he shifted to the forest. Suddenly his gun swung up, resounded. A heron fell over screaming in a patch of weeds, one of the supports of its gaunt perch shattered. Lowering the weapon, he turned a grin.

"Like a shark's," Shepherd thought, hitting it.

For a moment Savery seemed suspended in rigid astonishment; then he pitched over backward. His back struck the road with a crash. The gun, pulled down with him in the fall, went off again. There was a stinging slap at Shepherd's hip.

He thought again: "Sooner than I expected," and jumped.

The moving car carried him short, gave time for Savery to come erect and set himself in a waiting crouch. And then, as the distance between them narrowed, Shepherd saw him drop the gun. The truck rolled on.

Many psychiatrists hold that we are a product of our younger days. There had been a time when Jack Shepherd collected merit badges, read the *American Boy* magazine, and sought out bullies more satisfyingly concrete than those who with their toadies pestered the brothers Rover. The residue of such pursuits, nonsensical in a dog-eat-dog world, now rose to haunt him. He was sure that his height and reach could cut Savery to pieces in open, stand-up contest. But the squat man's gesture in tossing aside his weapon summoned the absurd gallantries of that early instruction. He kept coming. They closed.

A wrong decision, he found at once; arms like crushing cables went around him, and they went down to where Savery could make his fight in his own way. Underneath by the chance of the fall, Shepherd's hampered punches glanced unavailingly off a head drawn into a solid column of neck muscles. It was like wrestling a nimble barrel. He braced desperately as he felt his rib case start to go. Savery squeezed harder, with a series of panting grunts. Shepherd could smell cognac, but no breath was getting into his aching chest. Weakening, with perfect clarity he realized that a moment's loss of rigidity would finish him. He tried frantically to arch. And as his head flung back, he saw a panther lying on a limb a dozen feet above them, tail switching, poised between instincts of escape and more natural needs.

He sought to call out, but his smothering burden was too intent on breaking his spine for warnings. He strained up once more, and this time won enough space between them to grab

Savery's testicles. A savage wrench brought a wild cry. He twisted again, and air rushed into his tortured lungs as Savery reared up, loosening his hold and prying at the punishing hands. Shepherd's fist whipped free, and this time described an effective arc. It thudded against Savery's chin with the sound of a cleaver on a chopping block, snapping it back. Immediately he rolled, twisting free. His legs drew up and drove. Pain ripped from the wound caused by the accidentally discharged slug.

Savery spun on the road like a ball. Bounding up, he was starting back when he saw Shepherd throw himself and reach the gun. But he did not hesitate in launching a savate that brought him sailing toward the prone man like a force of nature.

To Shepherd, firing past them, his big feet seemed to hang in mid-air with a mammoth yowl from the falling cat. . . .

The fog lifted slowly. He was lying in the same position from which he had made his shot. Savery was kneeling beside him, his face drawn with pain, urinating on his leg.

"No—lie still," he commanded as Shepherd started up. "You are okay now—both conscious and disinfected. Do you hurt?"

"Herc and there." He looked down at his hip. The pants leg was split back from a wound that filled as he moved. He felt a lump on his head. "Got me at both ends, eh?"

Savery stood, gingerly buttoning his fly. "In truth, old fellow, I tried not to come down on you at the last instant. And you see I managed it, else you would now be having no more head than an eggshell."

"Thanks," dryly.

"Perhaps not deserved, in truth. It may be that," with a grin, "I was distracted by the dying protest of our friend." He moved a thumb at a pile of tawny fur a few feet away in the middle of the road. "But, mon dieu, what placement!" he burst out suddenly. "Flat down, off balance, and with me jumping at you—smack through the eye! Millet himself could have done no better!"

Shepherd felt his throbbing head. "Do y'think the driver will miss us?"

"He should so, stupid as he is," as he started to pull off his shirt. "Meanwhile I will patch you up. Same jungle style as cleaning your cut—simple but effective, no?"

"Here, use mine! It's thinner," he added, freeing the remaining buttons. "Binds better."

"As you say." Ripping the light cloth into tourniquet strips, he said again, "Smack through the eye! Not even one hole in the pelt."

"Is it a good one?"

"Good?" His gaze lifted beseechingly to the vault against the pale sky. "This newcomer! This green one wishes to know if a golden panther is worth the skinning!"

"Gold panther?"

"None other. And I was in a malaise of disappointment because of the imbecile with his talk of gaur! In one little morning's hunt you have taken a trophy for which even Fernand——"

"All right, all right, you can have it. Is the bullet still in there?"

"I think not, from the looks." He stopped. "Pardon—but did you say that I could have him?"

"Sure. After all, I'm only the second gun."

"But he is a gold panther!"

"It's just as dead as any other. It's yours."

Savory swallowed, then said more slowly, "Of course it was my weapon, but—I did not make the bag."

Shepherd shrugged. "Who says so?"

"I did?" with narrowing, hopeful eyes.

"Of course. Don't you remember? Just like that we had no trouble today?"

"Shepherd, you are a man! To confess, I had some doubt—but no more!" He grinned uncomfortably, looking away. "It could have been me before him, you know."

"Well, you didn't shoot me when you had the chance."

He was silent, thinking. Then: "No, in all truth, I did not. There is that to be said as well."

"The French," Shepherd sighed. "They are so beautifully sane. Now let's just forget the whole thing."

"Only the little contretemps which caused it—not what has resulted." He tied off the bandage and got to his feet. "Yes, we will talk no more of this incident," he went on thoughtfully. "There are other things for us to discuss. But later—for the time be quiet and rest."

His glance sharpened as from down the road came the sound of the returning truck, and his voice raised from the monotone which Shepherd now knew meant his periods of decision. "Here is that deserting son of a deserting son! If it were not you," he said, helping him to his feet, "I would ask a gamble for the stinking seat beside him." He felt tenderly at the front of his pants. "Euh, my privates! They feel that you have put me out of commission for—who knows?"

There was a moment before Shepherd smiled back.

X V

IT WAS a glancing flesh wound, holding no bullet and easily stitched. Ascribed to a falling gun, it both hurt and, due to its location, opened Shepherd to considerable jocularity around the hotel, but in it he saw a ticket out of his dilemma. Savery happily carted the panther off to a taxidermist, after accepting compliments on the kill with a modesty that brought him new respect in the bar—and his friendship had become so active that it promised to be proof against any accusation.

Alix too seemed to feel a slipping of her hold, for on the day after the hubbub of their return she came out to where he was sitting on the veranda. Her expression was troubled but stern.

"Don't get up," when he motioned to rise. "A man so battered must be given advantages."

"I'm not complaining."

"That is somewhat evident. In all, you have so smug a look that I think we should have another talk."

"Well, that's what I came for."

"No," she said, swinging a rubberized bag, "you came because I demanded it. But perhaps you now consider there is less reason to obey me so implicitly? That with Paul's new feeling for you, your position has improved?"

"In all truth, oui, madame, I was thinking such a thing. But how mistaken can one become, no?"

She frowned and gazed out over the bright grass. "Levity can be the mark of confidence, whether misplaced or not."

"And mine is misplaced? I have no reason to think that the hook is loosening in my mouth?"

"You do insist on being difficult," she said with a small sigh. "But there is a point you may have overlooked—two. One is that I have a source of influence over Paul also." She colored, but went on firmly. "I have conceit enough to believe that I can get him to back up any complaint I make, despite this," cuttingly, "present affection. But even should he refuse, what is more important is that I will go ahead. Of that you may be sure—because what I really am counting on is that you do not wish any examination by the Sûreté."

Shepherd swung up, dull blotches showing on his cheekbones. Her analysis was so correct that it banished like blown smoke the sense of security with which he had been lulling himself. Recognition of its ephemerality enraged him; if she was as staunch as she seemed, he was no better off than he had been the morning at the zoo. Less so, for Tuey Fung now was holding much more than the initial bait which had trapped him.

"You go to considerable pains to point out that I'm your patsy, Alix. Why don't you just crack out with what you want me to do, and we'll take it from there?" His anger increased as he saw the perturbation diminish in her face. "Do you think I've got nothing to do but hang around, waiting to see what goes with a pack of gunrunners?"

"Temper," she said, smiling for the first time. "And temperament. The tall dark knight irked because, perhaps, he sees nothing in the quest—or the lady who would send him on it?"

"Oh, balls to you and your schoolbooks! What's developed? Anything?"

Her chaffing smile held as she shook her head. "There has been no word from the courier, from Singapore. Of that I am quite sure. No, there is little we can do at the moment but wait, much as you dislike it. Wait and"—she raised the bag—"divert ourselves, that we do not become too nervous. I am going down to the Engs' houseboat for a swim. Will you come? It is cooler on the river, and their boy makes the best squashes in Pnom-Penh."

"All right," he said sullenly. "Anything's better than waiting for nothing."

His sense of frustration continued through the first streets of the ride, but by the time they reached the lower end of Rue Francis Garnier it was gone, replaced by something close to relaxation. The freshening air was only part of the reason, he admitted; mainly it was due to the aura of the woman beside him. How did she do it—reach at will through anger, suspicion, and loyalty as he knew it? He saw that again, her objective achieved, she had put aside the unrelenting alertness which she could draw like a blade. A picnic mood was upon her, merry and infectious. She talked in such trivialities—of her new bathing suit, of how proud she was of her new stroke, of how he must be sure and compliment Mrs. Eng on making the boat Antibes-like—that he glanced at her occasionally, wondering where along the way the lady of poise had been traded for this bantering sprite. But he was certain, nevertheless, of having become almost happy.

On the river an easy wind was flapping the canvas of fishing boats. Her driver deposited them at the water's edge. A native in starched linen was waiting in a large rowboat, to pull them out to a converted junk bright with paint and a new suit of lateen sails.

Smiling nervously, Mrs. Eng piped them aboard with a cocktail shaker. Her husband had, she apologized, been held at the palace, but might yet appear. Meanwhile would he give his opinion of their decoration job? While Alix changed, she led him on a tour of inspection of an incongruous blend of pirate echoes and *la vie Riviera*. Credibly masking his opinion that it

looked like a chop-suey parlor executed by a retired whore, he dredged up a word from an old movie about American high life.

"Yes, the whole effect is quite yar."

Puzzled but pleased, certain that she and her nautical courtier had taken another step toward smartness, she at last served him a drink and let him get off his beleaguered feet. He slid pleasurably into a deck chair, to wait with mounting impatience for Alix's appearance.

When she came out of the cabin the glass was just reaching his lips. It paused. A slender band partially covered her small flaring bust, another passed around her narrow hips in a brief diaper. Topped by tight-pulled hair, her tanned lines were almost those of the chaste Diana. Yet despite a lack of familiar advertisements (light showed between her legs just below the flat crotch of the negligible trunks) her frank nudity gave off more sex than when she was clothed—special, reserved, with a turn toward perversity. Beside hers, he thought, Peggy's body would be that of a lady wrestler just out of the amateurs. Tasting nothing, he took a long pull at his drink.

Mrs. Eng came to stand beside him as she climbed to the rail and stood outlined against the persimmon sky. For a moment she tensed herself, then called down to them, incredibly, "A last one in is the rotten egg!" and thumped into a mighty splash.

He watched, half convinced that when she came up it would be with a broken neck. But she popped cheerfully to the top, crying, "Watch me! Crawl à la Weismuller!" Her arms wheeling awkwardly, she began to whack away from the boat as though she were beating a rug.

"She is so charming," Mrs. Eng. said. "Such a woman, yet such a girl. So urbane, yet such a gamine."

"So beautiful."

He heard her give a little hopeful laugh. "Now, M'sieur Shepherd—one is not to forget such things as husbands, is one?"

"Beautiful swimmer, I meant."

"Of course that is not what you meant at all," with the same small chuckle. "We both appreciate that she swims most badly."

It was true, he saw. A few yards away Alix was thrashing along

like a slim, eccentric ferryboat. He turned. Mrs. Eng was watching him with European felinity on top of rich oriental amusement. He nodded in acknowledgment.

"Touché, I guess is what you call it."

"Such a Parisienne—yet such a lover of le sport." She sighed. "What a pity that my husband and I are not more so. Poor dear—she may wish a swim when there will be no one on the ship. Do you think it wise for her to do so alone?"

"Not if she doesn't swim better than that," carefully.

She smiled, nodding. "However, she is welcome to come out any time. What misfortune that your injury prevents you from the water! Still, you perhaps will be well soon. Would you care for another drink?"

"I would. I also would like to congratulate Mr. Eng on his choice of a wife. I am sure that he will have a great career in the diplomatic."

"How charming of you to say. It is always pleasant to make new friends," she said, leaving him with a bow so conspiratorial that he felt, over in the city, Paul Savery's forehead must be starting to throb.

Was all the Eng family, then, not quite so Francophile as the husband? Or were those straightforward hints mere extracurricular products of the schooling at the Château de Balleville, of which Mrs. Eng had proved so proud the night of the party? Stretching, he looked out toward Alix's frenzied navigation, to see that it had become a stationary whirlpool above which a single arm flashed.

He was overside before he thought to shuck off his coat and shoes. Their drag started immediately, but compelled by the urgency of the message on the face disappearing in the churning water, he did not pause to remove them.

She was going down again when he reached her. He dove, grabbed, and the brassière held as he pulled her up. Twisting toward him, her teeth showed fiercely, but as he got his free hand up she laboriously gasped that he need not knock her out.

"I know that I—must not clutch upon you," as if reciting by rote. "Or we both——"

"Quiet—save your breath! Put your hands on my shoulder and don't fight. Relax—the water will hold you up." She obeyed, and, supporting her waist, he raised her head above the surface. She began to breathe gratefully, with an occasional embarrassed cough.

"Go ahead, get it up."

"I—do not like to have you—see me this way."

"Don't be such a goddamn lady! I've seen girls spit before."

"I mean—such a failure. I swim," mournfully, "after all, not so good."

"You're doing fine."

She gagged again, but this time she turned her head and dutifully spat. "Excuse me," she said, her color coming back. "Oh dear."

He laughed. "All right, now I'll give you a tow. Just lie back and hang onto my legs," as he turned her around. "Kick your feet if you feel like it—it'll help shove us along."

"I feel such a fool," she said when she was cradled safely.

"Stop talking," he told her sharply, reaching out into a back-stroke.

Halfway to the boat she looked around, as if puzzled. "But why didn't you let me go?"

He did not answer. It seemed a waste of breath to admit that he did not know why—any more than he could explain why he hadn't solved his difficulty by killing Paul the day before. Something of this thinking must have been in his eyes, for suddenly she released her hold and, resuming her eggbeater stroke, made the remaining distance unassisted.

"Mon dieu, Alix!" Mrs. Eng exclaimed as the steward pulled them aboard. "Your very life was almost lost!"

"Quite true," she admitted. "And in the East, does not his action now make Mr. Shepherd responsible for me?"

"Oui," the hostess tittered to him. "And so you must see that another time she does not come out here unattended."

"Maybe Mme. Savery has learned from the experience," he said, looking at her inquiringly. "Maybe after this she won't take foolish chances."

"Once my mind is made up I do not change," she answered with a short headshake. "No, it is as it was before"—and her smile returned—"I yet will swim à la Weismuller!"

"Stubborn," Shepherd sighed, and went below. The steward had laid out a sweater and duck pants for him to wear back to the hotel, but, finding no blood on his bandage, he rummaged through the lockers until he turned up a pair of bathing trunks. If his wound had not opened during the first dip it might not with a second, and he wanted no more opportunities for Mrs. Eng to develop her flair for intrigue. Returning to the river, he swam until he saw Alix on deck, dressed.

They left as soon as he had squirmed into the borrowed garments, with Mrs. Eng waving them off so knowingly that she seemed an integral part of her love-boat surroundings. "She makes me feel," Alix said, "like part of an assignation. Did she say anything to—to make you think——"

"Don't start getting feminine. It doesn't become you." He slumped against the gunwale, watching the oarsman.

"You don't think I'm feminine?"

"I hadn't thought much about it." She was silent, and after a time he turned.

She was studying him quizzically. "Of what are you thinking?"

"Nothing." The river had quieted, but he had a sense of being in heavy seas rolling with giant waves.

"You should try it more often. All your—meanness seems quite gone. What was it, really?"

"After that dig at you about storybooks," as his gaze turned to a distant freight sampan, "how am I going to admit that it was something that begins 'Once aboard the lugger . . .?'"

"—and the girl is mine.' You are romantic, aren't you, behind all that dreadful, snappish, go-to-hell manner? It is indicated at times when you are not so carefully on guard. In Saigon you asked me what it was that I'm afraid of," she said quietly, "and I told you. Can you be so honest with me?"

"I'm afraid"—his voice sounded remote enough to belong to someone else—"I'm afraid that in all my life I'm not going to have a woman like you." He heard the oars squeak in their

locks, felt astonishment freezing on his face like a clamp that never would leave it. He looked at her.

Unsuspected rouge was standing out from her cheeks as clearly as the paint on her lips. Her mouth opened, but said nothing.

"I'm sorry," he managed. "Particularly if this lad understands English."

"He doesn't," she said almost unintelligibly. "That's why I—made you say it. You see"—and this time her words were clearly phrased—"I had to know. Because I feel the same way about you. And it would be a terrible thing, wouldn't it, if you were so unfeeling as you would have yourself believe?"

The boat nudged against a tiny pier. She stood, staring down at him for a long moment. Then she stepped out onto the lashed poles and ran toward her car. Entering it as quickly, she was gone.

The boatman handed over his wet lump of clothes, impassively polite, as disinterested as though long ago he had accepted the actions of white people as beyond either question or understanding.

Shepherd tipped him and went up to the street. As he hailed a ricksha he was not thinking, as he had a week ago, of how a gentleman should appear to the doorman of a luxury hotel.

XVI

THE Great Hall blazed with light. Beneath its nine-tiered parasol the King was on his throne, greeting old acquaintances and receiving strangers brought up the seven steps by members of his court. Uncrowned, wearing only token decorations, he was garbed in a long-coated suit of white silk which further recognized the informality of the occasion. A few visiting dignitaries from other provinces were more richly caparisoned, but aside from his ranking military and a scattering of foreign brass the floor beneath him swarmed with guests in European dress. The

voice of a hundred voices mushroomed up to the ceiling, drifted down through interstices in the heat, and was raised again by new guests of mannered, cautious, ambitious intercourse.

Spaced along the walls were huge silver bowls of tepid punch. Standing near one of these, Shepherd saw Eng, sleek as a parlayed headwaiter, conducting the Saverys toward their presentation. He put down his cup and wandered out a side door. How, in all this polite press, did she manage to remain so freshly remote? Was it part of the same unshakable poise she had demonstrated earlier in the evening?

Savery had called his room soon after he had reached it, shouting that he must stay near to protect them always, insisting that he join them at dinner. "The wine might be poisoned, old savior of the Saverys!"

He had accepted, not wishing more thanks, but tempted by the prospect of seeing Alix again so soon. It had not been a happy experience. Savery, disturbed by the danger, had been openly demonstrative toward them both, while Alix treated him like an old family friend. She was warm, charming, gracious—and absolutely different from the woman on the river. When the Engs arrived for them he had tried to excuse himself, but as if to underscore her self-possession she had insisted that he accept the invitation. Altogether, as they sped toward the palace, he could find no reason to change an old belief that figuring women was like making book on a race of crazy horses.

The side porch was far more bearable than the throne room, its marble length cool with the scent of water lilies and orchids in porcelain pots. Lighting a cigarette, he stared out over the towers and spires and pastry battlements that enclosed the treasures, princes, family, mandarins, ministers, magistrates, courtiers, entertainers, guards, retainers, and servants of one of the last absolute monarchs in the pageant of history. What was she thinking in there now? Of the handsome Emperor of Cambodia, with the ashes of ten generations of regal ancestors in jars on a nearby altar? Or of an aging American renegade whose record would be cause for alarm among the custodians of the royal knickknacks?

"So here you are." Paul Savery seemed about to erupt in a geyser of boiling blood. Dragging a handkerchief over his swollen face, he protested, "I suffocate! And Alix looks like a glaze! How do women endure these things?"

"They'd trade a stroke for a curtsy any day."

"Euh, how true! I absented myself soon after His Majesty received us. I am sure that he would prefer to talk to a beautiful woman than to her dull businessman of a husband."

"A suggestion of Eng's, no doubt?"

"One must keep one's fences mended," with a shrug. "Where were you? He wanted to take you up with us, but you disappeared no sooner than we were here."

"Just looking around, keeping out of the crowd. Anyhow, he's too nice a little guy to embarrass with your dubious friends."

Savery looked at him quickly. "Dubious, my protector from the panther? The rescuer of my wife?"

"Writer too, remember. Who can tell? I might want to do a piece on all this someday—and what does a diplomat do when he's out of a job?"

"Reporters make me uneasy." He frowned. "You have not been scribbling in your notebook?"

"I'm on a vacation. It's only when I'm out of money that I start thinking."

Wiping his fingers carefully with the handkerchief, Savery peered at him for a run of seconds before saying quietly, "There is a possibility that you need not resume such a futile occupation for some time to come."

"Oh?"

He thought a moment, then crossed to the door and looked into the hall. His big head bobbed as he sought a view through the undulations of the crowd. When he came back satisfaction was heavy on his face.

"Alix is still with the King, like a good one. I do not think that he soon will forget her. Or my name, should it be mentioned to him again."

Shepherd nodded. "It will be, I'll bet. Eng's no boy to let a regent forget who produces an oasis in an array of drips."

"He is a handy man to know," Savery agreed shortly. "He can, for one thing, permit our escape from this ragout. Come, we have talk to make, as I said."

"But what about Alix?" The name, automatically said, hung for a moment on the perfumed air. He saw that Savery had noted its use and was frowning slightly.

"Mme. Savery, I should say. First names after five minutes is just another old American custom," he went on, furious with this exasperating need to keep things amenable. "I'm sorry."

"But why should you apologize? Has not a lady's lifesaver the privilege of using her given name? But no, it is best that she remain. The Engs can return her later. Her presence here is of value—but meanwhile we will have some time together, uninterrupted, back at the hotel."

But there, established in a corner of the bar, he appeared in no hurry to disclose what he had to say. He had his drink done over, sent up to his suite for cigars, spoke of how well the taxidermist promised the pelt would mount. The levelness of his voice told Shepherd that behind these bothersome preliminaries Savery's mind was busy with more important considerations. He sat quietly, waiting, and presently his uncommunicative patience was answered.

"There is a quality of fate in the coincidence of some meetings," Savery said after a long pause. "I read but little—a man of action, one charitably inclined might put it. It could be that many thinkers such as you have written that many times. I would not know. Yet in all truth when we encountered at the Casino I had the strange feeling that we were to know each other well, one way or another—"

An odd shock of recognition coursed through Shepherd. The calm words had so exactly duplicated his own premonition that he kept silent by attending to his drink.

"In all truth, it was my impression that further meetings between us might be as unpleasant as those of our beginning. You see, the name of Jack Shepherd was not as unfamiliar to me as mine to you. What a jest that the man I looked upon as a source of trouble, perhaps, should have saved both my life and that of my wife as well!"

"You can check that off. If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have been near that cat, and if I hadn't gone out on the Eng's boat——"

"Alix might not have sought to demonstrate her fancied abilities in the water? There is sanity in your point," he vouchsafed. "Also an engaging modesty. But I am a realist. In times of need you were there, and acted with commendable dexterity. Is that to be denied?"

"All right—so I'm a hero."

"Not in the eyes of all, I fear," even more slowly. "In some fussy quarters you might be considered, ah, not quite on the side of the angels."

"Fussy in what way? Like Louis Hai, or like Inspector Duphaine?"

Savery's head went back with a roar that brought the barkeep jerking up from his doze like a brown jack-in-the-box. After a moment Shepherd identified it as laughter, even as the roaring man brought a blow down on the table that nearly shattered its glass top.

"Did I not know? Mon dieu, did I not know that you would make the admission just like that, cold and hard as a chisel, steady as one who will take time for a placement while lying on the ground with——"

"I was open to you from both Duphaine and Louis," Shepherd cut in. "It wasn't much of a gift to let you know that I know that you know they're sharp. And don't give me too much credit for that shot, either. Most of it was luck."

Suddenly he thought: "Why, it must be coming back!"

"That is good enough for me," Savery was crying, "a man with such luck! I am enchanted with you, Jack Shepherd! In truth, I have not such a man beside me for too many years! We will be a pleasure, you and me!"

"It would have been one for me if you had let that Louis Hai thing alone. I lost a nice commission."

"So that is why you were in Saigon! Duphaine, you may care to know, is uncertain but watchful," he said in a quieter, more confidential tone. "It seems some word preceded you from

Cairo. As for your loss, no fear, I will make it up to you, in due course. Had you a market, or did you hope to arrange for a sale?"

So—he either didn't know about Bijou or was testing him more. He shrugged. "What's the difference now? You stepped in, Louis listened, and I got taken out of the play."

"That is easily fixed. I need that someone acts for me. And you are the tourist-writer who does it! And what a natural possibility! With your little notebook you may butt around as few else without offense! Marvelous!"

"That depends on where I butt. Who are your people for those arms? Or maybe I shouldn't ask that."

Savery patted his hand. "There will be no secrets between us, Shep—is that not as our little friend Peggy says? By the way, is——"

"About your people, you were saying?"

"To be sure, to be sure," with a fraternal laugh. "Such delicacy for so complete a man—an occurrence both unusual and impressive. But as to my customers, no, they are not as yet arranged for. I have been considering how best to proceed—there is no one to trust in this country of cheats—and you are no less than a miracle in reply."

"Then you haven't made contact with buyers yet?"

"Not yet. There is time. The matériel will be safely cached."

"I should think the Viet Nam would be a good market," he said casually.

"Yes, and it is always good to keep both sides of one's fence mended. But there are others who would be interested—such as the Pei Lien Chion."

"Who are they?"

"The hotheads, the fighting committee of the Vehoutang—a group which equally hates both us and the Kuomintang of China. They are rabid"—he shrugged—"but they have little money for such a purchase. One cannot deal with those who cannot pay well."

"Well then, what about the French themselves?"

"The French? But, my dear Shep, we already have sufficient arms!"

He almost laughed at the surprised and faintly disappointed face. "Yes, of course——"

"But enough of this about what is not yet at hand," Savery said briskly. "We will approach it at its proper time. What I wanted most to discuss is another thing. A venture that, in all truth, may make that deal appear as minor." Shoving the table back, he ordered fresh drinks to be sent up to his rooms. "Come, I have a paper to show you."

"Wouldn't tomorrow be better? Mme. Savery——"

"Alix! Alix! And Paul here—with you now Shep to us! It is agreed? Then come, before she returns to relate her triumph. A love of women must be expiation for some horrendous sin," he exclaimed, leading the way into the lobby. "You think she is of surpassing intelligence, and euh!—she begins to prattle of something called crawl à la Weismuller!"

Immediately they were in his sitting room he went to a closet for a locked leather folder. Shepherd glanced around, impressed by the lived-in atmosphere which made these rooms different from his own similar apartment. Where did it come from? Those few jars of oleanders and a spilled book bag? The bottle of nail polish on a lamp table? Or the nightdress spilling across one of the turned-down twin beds visible through the bedroom door? The waiter knocked and he went to the door, his heart beating heavily, grateful for an excuse to move. When he returned with their drinks Savery was on the divan, the folder on his knees.

Indicating that Shepherd was to join him, he sat for a time in silence, as if scouting the final possibilities of what he had to disclose. Then he grunted and unlocked the folder, saying: "I wish to engage upon a small expedition. It could be more advisable for me to go alone, if less expedient. But since finding you, I have decided that it would be well to enlist your aid, if possible."

"I'm listening."

"And interested, I hope—for this project requires another who is both adept in bad country, and," with a smile, "somewhat of an outlaw."

"I'm still listening."

"And more interested? I thought you might be, old Shep. Indeed, yes." Unfolding a map, he spread it on the low table before them. "As you see, this outlines the roads and rivers between here and Thailand. From Pnom-Penh the route proceeds up the channel to the Tonle Sap." His stubby finger swept up to the lake and out a thin river line to a triangle. "Thence here, where the boat is to be left." Indicating a horned skull encircled with ink, off from the first symbol, his finger jumped to a blowup clipped to the general survey. "This details the section between Kompong Thom and the border, for the strike inland to here"—as he pointed to a square on the second elevation. "And then——"

Opening an envelope, he took out a square of parchment paper on which hand-drawn lines described the terrain around a tiny stupa. "—this brings one the rest of the way. With ordinary luck it should be no more than a few days."

"What's there? More gaur?"

He laughed, but as he picked up his glass Shepherd saw it shake. "No, this time we go for a more lucrative bag—for that marking means a temple unknown to any of the antiquities people! And do you know what that can mean?" he cried. "One of the few yet undiscovered! Imagine—just imagine—what a trove it can be of objects in the purest of gold and gems!"

Excitement had pulled him to his feet so abruptly that he failed to notice Shepherd's amazement. So this was Bijou's customer for her map—the man who unknowingly had spoiled her deal with Louis Hai, her very important and respected big businessman!

"I've heard the Khmers were great workers in precious metal," he said; "and the layout at the palace shows it—but what if it's actually there? You'd have to smuggle it out of the country, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

"And once out, what about a market?"

A fleeting, withholding look came and went in Savery's heated expression. "No fear, it would bring a fortune."

What had caused that quick expression? he wondered. Cupidity? Or was there another angle? A gift to a government—French or Viet Nameese, whichever might seem more advantageous—that would be properly grateful? “Yes, I guess it would,” he admitted. “There’s always a place for that junk. It would have to bring a price, though, to make it worth while,” as he again bent over the map. “Those little lines spell a lot of trouble.”

“There is danger, of course,” Savery said curtly. “But what of importance is gained without it? We will travel light and fast. I know the country—can speak the dialects we will need. I do not expect that the savages are politically conscious, and we will avoid the places where guerrillas may be expected. I have no fear.”

Shepherd looked up quickly, but the block of man pacing the carpet plainly had intended neither insult nor boast. He merely was stating a fact—an acceptance of courage and capabilities as known to him as the strength of his chunky body. Standing, he went to him and for the first time of his own volition touched him.

“Nor have I, Paul.”

“Good, good,” so calmly that Shepherd saw he had never doubted his acceptance. “We will bring it off, you and me. But no word of this to Alix, eh? What she does not know she cannot babble about too much.”

Shepherd agreed—even as he marveled at how different we all seem, one to another, like prisms turning and viewed from different positions. To him Alix was the last woman who would vaingloriously recount her conquests with the palace crowd or babble secrets. Did Savery know her at all? Or did he?

XVII

THE WISE abstain from illicit love. This finding—arrived at by either personal soul searching or from fears handed down by pul-

pit and press—has great favor with its accepters. They quote homicide statistics. They point to dismaying proofs of consequences in apprehensive attitudes, alcoholism, brats weeding up without proper care. They indicate their own peace of mind and honest eyes. They are, they say, blessed as well as wise in shunning this scourge of the emotions, this blight upon the social structure. And yet, for all its terrible freight of death, despair, and destruction, it persists, a bad penny of the cardiographs. This is solely because man, that curious animal, is fatally attracted to the means of ruin. So long as he knows that something is not to his best welfare, so long will he be drawn to what is illegal, immoral, and unhealthy. So long as distant grass looks more appetizing than his own field must he taste of it. So long as a strange apparatus is more quickening than a familiar one, then in his idiocy he must possess it. He is a regardless scapegrace, this wanderer from rectitude—an affront to all good people and their tenets. And yet he does have one excuse (if it may be so termed) to explain the conduct which his betters find disgusting. It is that so long as his heart is stimulated by holding another desperately needful heart against its forbidden self he can take assurance that the game is not done, the shade not drawn, the grave not yet.

No tamperer with such considerations or specious summaries, Jack Shepherd nevertheless was brought close to both by a call from Peggy. The telephone rang while he was having breakfast on his balcony. Thinking it might be Alix, he answered as quickly as he had in Saigon—and again frowned with disappointment as her voice came over, faint and filled with buzzes.

“Is that you, Sh-sh-sh——”

“Yes, it’s me, Peg. How are you?”

“Not so g-good, I guess. Darling, are you all right?”

“Why sure—of course. What’s the matter?”

“I d-don’t just know. All last evening I was f-feeling like there was something wrong. I d-didn’t sing very well. People n-noticed.”

“Why that’s silly. I’m fine—sure. What could be wrong?”

"If I knew I w-wouldn't be calling, w-would I?" And then more distinctly, "Or would I?"

"I don't get it. Did you drink last night? Got depression or something?"

"Of course not! A f-fine way to talk, when I've had all this t-trouble getting through t-to you!"

"Well, don't be fretting. Everything's aces here."

"You mean your f-friend fixed you up?"

He grimaced with exasperation. "Not yet quite, but soon, I'm sure. Meanwhile I'm going on a hunting trip with Paul Savery."

There was blank silence, then: "You're what? Oh, Shep—he's liable to g-gun you!"

"He already has."

"What!"

"I said," hastily, "that he's already loaned me a gun. We should have some good hunting."

"I thought you said—holy s-smoke! You'd have scared m-me out of my p-pants if I w-was——"

"Well, see that you do at the Casino. Do you hear? How's it going?"

"Oh, fine. I'm the t-toast of Saigon—which g-gives you an idea about Saigon. Come on b-back, Shep. D-don't wait on that miser. They let me win at the t-tables as if I had good sense."

"Sock it away for mad money," he said shortly; and then more kindly, "I'll be along in a few days. How's Lem?"

"Hanging around l-like the germ I'm going to die f-from. Funny—I never thought he l-liked me much. B-but he watches as close as if h-he thought you'd be worried about me."

"I am, Peg," he said, but when he heard the words he knew that neither his feeling about her nor his fears were what the words said.

"If you were you'd hurry b-back. I'm a healthy girl—r-remember?"

"I'll make it as fast as I can. Better hang up now, honey, at these prices."

"All right, darling. Good-by now."

"Good-by, Peg."

He stood looking at the dead receiver, fretful, ashamed of not having been nicer to her or able to feel more about her, yet already hoping that he would soon be hearing from Lem that her sailing had been arranged. It had to be faced—once he had recognized how deeply she had entangled his feelings, alarm had come as well. She was changing him; with her to consider, he could not operate with the carelessness which had been so effectively enjoyable in the past. He had begun to think things over, to hesitate, actually to flinch from danger rather than go headlong toward it with the old abandon. And how much worse it could get! Marriage, a home, babies—they loomed like the signposts of some suburban train. Peggy, in fine, was no more than perfumed noose—while Alix . . .

He got his hat and hurried out. As his heart soared with the mere thought of her name, he suddenly knew what Alix was too.

Taking a cab, he drove into the business section to have his wound dressed. It was not healing well, apparently, for between scandalous stories the doctor told him to take more rest. While a fresh bandage was being applied he considered asking for his bill, but with it in place rejected the notion. The request would only draw inquiries and, perhaps, protests about the trip. He felt as usual; it was needless to stir up discussion as to why he must make a safari just now. Besides, he figured, he would have money for such indulgences when he got back—if he did. And if he didn't, he had just stuck a croaker who was trying to string out an account. Promising to call again in a couple of days, he started out to assemble his gear.

The shops had not yet yielded to the midday heat. He walked along, part of the loafers and their industrious counterparts who animatedly filled the sidewalks. It was the cross section of contrast that never failed to absorb him—the neat businessmen, bespectacled and brief-cased, and the brazen skin of undisguised natives, each to his own version of the daily pursuit. They were an attractive people, with their precise forms and cameo features. An element of the sun was about them which seemed to allow this unmarked scurry through its shattering rays. The few other

foreigners who were abroad inspected him with swift appraisal. But the gold-coin faces of Cambodians, Annamese, Tonkinese, Malays, and Chinese were incurious, as if they had automatically accepted him as a rival.

In the shop of an obese buddha given breath and an alpaca jacket he found the basic requirements of his outfit—footwear and sun-tans. With increasing happiness he bought two sets of heavy khakis, hobnailed boots, lighter ones with crepe-rubber soles, and a dozen pairs of thick socks. Spine pads were laced on the shirts, and the pants were long enough to tuck comfortably into the tops of the strong, flexible shoes. Seeing a rack of raincoats, he added two, the extra against a possible lack on Savery's part.

As he was about to leave the Chinese rummaged up a heavy knife in a leather scabbard. Balanced on his palm, the broad blade spoke up his arm like a redoubtable friend. Savery had told him that all the needed accessories were ready, but, lifting it thoughtfully, he added it to the bundle.

Paying for the purchases, he ordered them sent to the hotel and returned to the peep show of the streets. It had become hotter, with a corresponding diminishment of both traffic and pedestrians. He strolled through almost deserted streets until a sidewalk café invited shelter.

On the outer fringes of the protection afforded by the canopy a masseur, dripping like a seal, worked on a customer who lay unconcernedly on the sidewalk. A magnificent lady in a silk robe stopped her lacquered ricksha while a troop of colonial soldiers swung past. There was nothing in the exquisite composure of her face to reveal how the sight of their uniforms affected her, but, settling between the shafts of the cart, her puller spat sullenly. Rising, Shepherd decided that it might be wise to pick up some extra ammunition for his revolver.

At the hotel two message slips were in his box—a request for him to call M. Savery's room, and an advice that Mme. Savery was at the dansant.

In the bogus elegance of the dining room a number of the city's elect had been drawn by the weekly occasion. Perspiring

but determinedly gay, they were jiggling about to the music of an ungifted band of practitioners of le jazz hot. He glimpsed Alix at a window table. He saw her refuse a local blade's bow with a soothing smile, and as he came up the disappointed fellow withdrew, jealous as a Barbary pigeon.

"I won't dance," he said, taking the other chair. "So don't ask me."

"Into every life must come a disappointment. Perhaps this uses up your quota for me?" Her lips were still curved pleasantly, but there was no humor in her eyes. "What of this trip, Shep?"

"He asked me not to say."

"Naturally—because it is for something other than what he says. No sensible one would go for mere hunting, the way things are outside most strongholds."

"Well, you know how sporting gentlemen are."

"Yes," she answered calmly, "but it is you and Paul who are going tomorrow."

His grin died. "That technique's no good with me, Alix; I've used it too many times myself. I was going to tell you—as soon as you remembered I said I'd work with you. There's no need for you to be watching me from behind that phony smile."

"Shep!" she whispered, her face paling. "You must not cut at me so! If my English is awkward, it is the best I know—but I trust you, I beg you to believe! I simply do not dissemble well. That is it only! If I am worried," unhappily, "it shows."

"What are you worried about?"

"This trip—this rapport suddenly between you and Paul. I—oh, I do not know. Forgive me."

"For what? Getting friendly enough with Paul so that I can learn what he's up to? Or believing what you said in the boat?"

Her glance fluttered down to her teacup. "You know what I said was—is true. But I should not have said it, nonetheless. It was so incautious——"

"You regret it?" he asked, fighting the buoyancy which her strained cheeks, the bitten lower lip, had started rolling through him.

"I—regret having voiced it. At this time—while there yet is

so much to be done. Until then we cannot—we must be careful to arouse no suspicion from Paul that we—that——”

“Say it!”

She took a long, shuddering breath. “Please—help me—not try to make me more foolish! We cannot risk——”

“Yes,” he said above the explosions of his pulse, “you’re right. The less said, the less is apt to slip out the next few days.”

She raised her eyes and said simply, “I trust you.”

“You should.”

“I do. You must be sure of it—now.”

“It’s a treasure hunt,” he said after a moment, “complete with map. Paul thinks he knows where there’s a temple full of jewels, so help me God.”

Her amazement was so genuine that his grin became an outright laugh. Before it she relaxed slowly, as though believing him, yet finding credence difficult. “That was quite the last of all things to expect!”

“Of course it may be a blind.”

Concern came sweeping back into her expression. “That he might actually be making a rendezvous with customers for the arms, instead of what he says?”

“I think it’s what he says.”

She thought, and then admitted with the beginning of a smile. “Indeed, I do also! Why, he once financed an expedition to raise a galleon a man told him about. For weeks he spoke of gold bars and bullion.” She was smiling truly as she said, “I am so relieved. I have been frantic with fear that something might have been arranged before—before——”

“We could smear it?”

“Yes.” She gave him a full look far into the long gray eyes. “Yes,” she repeated, “before we could prevent it.”

A certainty beginning to emerge from a hidden crevice in his mind, he turned his glance toward the room. Could it be . . . ?

Then, not twenty feet away, he saw Savery approaching, a half frown making his face heavier. Raising his hand in quick salute, he drew out a chair. “Sit down, Paul, while I go upstairs to see you.”

But for a few moments Savery continued to stand, protesting Shepherd's failure to return his call, casting little glances like ant feelers over them.

"It was my fault," Alix interjected. "I sidetracked him. How otherwise am I to contend with all this business of plans? Such a bore, Paul! And it is certain that you too appear in need of respite."

Evidently satisfied, he dropped onto the chair and pulled a ball of handkerchief from his sleeve. "Not for a moment! I have been having too much of a time in getting us ready. Everything is fixed," he told Shepherd blithely, rubbing his florid cheeks. "Eng brought your license and has hired us a boat and crew. I have arranged for the rest—pharmacy, tent, dehydrated food, canteens, everything. Did you obtain your clothes?"

"All set."

"Then we are ready! We will start early tomorrow—and before we know it will be in the"—he laughed—"happy hunting ground!"

"Let's hope we know it better than that guide with the gaur."

"Ah, but this time we have real information!"

"You're sure it's not dangerous?" from Alix. "There is the fighting still up near Hanoi, you know—"

"We will not be near it," he assured her. "And the other areas are being cleared with all haste, as the opposition weakens from lack of matériel. I am told the attempt to break it finally will be soon. Both trade and the tourists are wanted back quite too much. In fact, chérie, the de luxe hotel at Angkor will attempt to resume next week, with dances. You are to come up with the Engs, and we will meet you there, Shep and I, decked in trophies."

"Then hostilities are coming to an end?" Alix asked.

"Do not they always, sooner or later? But have no worry, we will avoid those still about. And as for anything else—what is sport without a soupçon of danger?" He twisted around to look for a waiter.

Shepherd met Alix's gaze across the table. It was level, fraught, a command and promise.

"Is that not so, Shep?" Savery demanded. "What is life without the great salt!" His back was still turned—and, again watching the eyes of his wife, Shepherd knew that now he had a better reason to do what, from the first, she had intended for him to do.

XVIII

Were this world an endless place, and by sailing eastward we could for ever reach new distances, and discover sights more sweet and stranger than any Cyclades or Islands of King Solomon, then there were promise in the voyage. But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, sometime or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed.

Moby Dick

INDO-CHINA is shaped like an S in five sections. Cochin China and Cambodia, just above it, compose the base. The narrow, curving middle is formed by Laos and Annam, which complete the figure by swerving up to join Tonkin, at the top. Adept colonizers, the French have developed the principal cities and linked them with fine, garrisoned roads—a step away from which the jungle impassively eyes such figments of modernity, waiting to overwhelm them as it has other civilizations which have sprung up, carried on for a few hundred years, and been absorbed in its embrace. The people who begin where the pavement ends are much like the fastness in which they live. They have given way to the pink man where he is strongest, and elsewhere retained their own ways with a lack of change measured by the distance from his influence. In the green escape which has tripped a thousand piles of carved stone they resist his examples and demands much as their great Mekong River continues to roll.

It comes down from the highlands of Tibet, this old Mother of Waters, to separate Laos from Siam on the concave side of

the latter. Entering Cambodia, it sweeps magnificently on to Cochin China and the sea, a rich, life-giving artery. But at Pnom-Penh, where it picks up an outlet from the Tonle Basin, it does a strange thing. In the high-water period, from June to December, its overflow reverses this channel and feeds the great lake so fully that at times it rises nearly fifty feet.

This habit now presented Paul Savery with an advantage, for the current flowing upcountry would assist the speed of the type of craft he required. No river vessels visited the tributary where they would leave the Tonle Sap, even had he wished to summon attention by openly embarking on one. The passage called for just such a launch as Eng had been able to procure—one that would get them and their gear to the destination quickly and without special notice.

The focus of his maps was a point somewhere between Angkor and the point marking the triangle, where they must leave the boat. The unsettled condition of the country argued against having the boat wait while they went inland. If it was grabbed by guerrillas, they would return to find themselves stranded—unless they found a boat willing to take them back to Pnom-Penh, a bad gamble.

On the other hand he did not wish to approach the temple from Angkor. Porters in that vicinity, center of the antiquities project, might prove too curious as to what they were up to. So he made a plan which he explained to Shepherd as they churned through the early fog, past the homesteads and villages built on piles that straggled along the river near the city.

The boat would carry them the first lap and start back immediately. Local bearers would be used to assist with their gear until near the objective, then dismissed. He and Shepherd would make the next leg of the journey with as much equipment as they could easily carry. The discovery would predicate their next move. If it was big they would take only tokens and reconceal it for a later expedition. Then, retaining only basic necessities, they would cut the rest of the way across country to Angkor.

Shepherd whistled, examining the map later in the morning. Even rough measurements showed what a near thing that last

barricade of miles could be; they would have to move fast and expertly or their rotting carcasses easily might add to the mulch of some forest floor. He glanced at Savery, back at the stern working on a weapon. Some frog! Full of life, wealthy, a lovely wife, a place as secure as any in these topsy-turvy times—and risking it all as unconcernedly as though he had not figured the hazard, and dismissed it. Some king-size frog!

He smiled, for now he saw that it was not the possible pot of gold at the end of this improbable rainbow which had attracted the burly devil—not greed, but the urge toward jeopardy which is some humans' special hunger.

Suddenly he laughed, an unworded hello to a kindred spirit across the flat, stale mass of usual men. It was almost like falling in love.

Folding the map, he went aft. As Savery took it his eyes twinkled like black buttons. "Of what do you think so pleasantly, old shipmate? You are enjoying our little holiday?"

"I might like it even better if there wasn't so much walking mixed up in it."

"I thought you had noted my little joke," with a chuckle, "but your cheer persuades me that you have forgiven. You see, I feared that you might be a lazy fellow, after your experience on our other hike. How are your feet, by the way?"

"They'll be all right this time. You'll find out."

"Oh, but I already have great confidence in you, mon cher! And you must meet me on that score," he added more quietly. "I am no stranger in this country. I speak the dialects that we need, and my sense of direction is like a buzzard. This will be a stroll in the woods, no more."

"Let's hope so. But after this, no more tricks. I want to know everything in that round skull of yours if I have to beat it out with a club. Am I clear?"

Savery nodded amiably. "And I quite agree. No matter how small, I wish no differences that might cause more conflict. For after all, another time there could be no panther to come to your rescue."

Restraining a smile, Shepherd bent to poke at the disassembled breech of the big gun. "There'll probably be another time, Paul. But nevertheless I must say I like you. I tell you so now, because you might not believe it after I've taken you apart."

"Good Shep! You must not have such ambitions! No one ever defeats me—at anything! I too am fond of you—more all the time—and I will not have you be so ingenuous! I always win!"

"And I lose hard. Just mark that down in your diary for today, and look it up whenever you get to feeling fancy." He stretched. "Now that we're all straight, is there anything else you've been holding out on me?"

"Nothing." The oily rag tossed in his hand. "Nothing more."

"Good," as he straightened. "And forget what I said about us tangling, will you? Maybe we won't at all."

Savery's eyes, moving up to his, were cool and troubled. "I do not like this conversation; it makes me nervous. Is there perhaps something, in turn, that you should tell me?"

"That's a fair question. I wish I could answer it."

He had started away when he heard "Shep!" He turned. Savery was still hunkered over his rifle, regarding him as carefully as he had across the *chemin de fer* table. His voice floated over the engine's thumping: "I keep no diary."

Exasperation seeking to ball his hands into fists, he came striding back. "You're no fool, Paul—you must know by now that I don't push. I brought up what I did because I found you'd pulled a fast one and thought yourself smart about it. If you don't think I had a right to call you on it, let's have it out before we go any farther!"

"Mon dieu!" Savery was suddenly upright, his feet apart, his hands upraised. "One little deception—and how your feathers rise! Is it so wrong to think you might prefer the comfort of the hotel to a hard march?"

"Put it right down here at the start that this lazy fellow will walk the legs off you any time, any place!"

"So touchy!" as he brought the enormous arms down. "Have I once asked you to retract from calling me a hot gun?"

He looked so reproachful that Shepherd felt laughter begin to bubble in his stomach. "Well, didn't you deserve it?"

"In all truth," with a judicious nod, "you did have cause to malign me so. But it has caused me some anxiety, nevertheless."

"All right, I take it back. Hell's bells, if you want, I'll say you're a pure hunter."

"Good Shep!" he cried again, but this time appreciatively. "And now if you will finish this assembly I will instruct the boy about some food."

As he went forward, yelling for the boatman's helper, Shepherd shook his head and said aloud, "Some frog."

The boat trudged sturdily through the heavy water. Ahead the copper-colored band of the river rolled on like a highway leading into a molten sky. In it the sun was a brass cartridge—polished, hard, fixed. On either side banks grown with swamp grass and topped by heavier foliage unreeled as though from a changeless spool. The jungle breathed down from the flanking plateaus, an aromatic weight on the heat. A sampan blew past, and a peeling junk with patched sails. Occasional settlements showed through the green walls. Out from them stood a few palm-thatched canoes, their piroguiers paused at the sweeps in a bas-relief of casual curiosity. There was no sound save that of the engine, already accepted by the car as soundless.

They had a good lunch. Savery had brought a hamper from the hotel for them to "Eat well while we can!" A canvas had been stretched over the scrap of forward deck, and on a folding table in front of the hatch the deck boy served them cold roasted chicken, a brandy omelet, and a ripe miracle of cheese. Savery tossed a salad, and as a surprise produced a celebration bottle of champagne icing in a wooden bucket. "To our partnership!" with a flourish of his glass. "How well we should toast it in such imprisoned laughter!" Smacking his lips, he poured again, and began to chant:

"And much as wine has play'd the Infidel,
And robb'd me of my Robe of honour—well,
I often wonder what the Vintners buy
One half so precious as the Goods they sell."

"And you're the man who claims no books?"

"Only it—and do I need another? That old Omar knew it all, eh? Who does he not speak for with:

Indeed, indeed, Repentance oft before
I swore—but was I sober when I swore?
And then and then came Spring, and Rose-in-hand
My thread-bare Penitence apieces tore!"

His big hand slammed down on the table. "Now if only something like that would appear in your notebook I would approve of you even more!"

"And if it did you'd spend the years refining it that FitzGerald gave to Khayyám?"

"Refinement is no word for me, nor these literary allusions." He gave a surly belch. "Alix might know of them, but not me. I only know of my wish for you to write, if you must, lines that I can appreciate." He was silent, and then: "There are times on your face which impel me that you have dark thoughts, old Shep."

"About what, would you say?"

"Mon dieu, how could I know what goes on behind that shut face of yours? Only at times do cracks show through it—sometimes of assurance, sometimes of dismaying revelation, as when you said that we again may meet in violence."

"I told you to forget that."

"I know," with an abrupt change to quietude. "And as one who so often speaks in heat, I must not remember another's words so spoken. But I feel that you are important to me, good Shep—and that is why I do not wish for you to think ill of men like me here in Indo-China."

"What's this—the stirrings of a conscience?"

"Faugh! Have not we made this country what it is today?"

Shepherd smiled thinly. "You're satisfied with it? What should be one of the garden spots of the earth—torn with civil war, half starved, illiterate, voteless . . ." As the flush deepened on Savery's face he saw that he was again wading into the critical declarations that had pinked Duphaine. He reached for his glass.

"But I told you at the palace I only think when I'm broke. If this thing works out——"

"It will, no fear! And if not it, something else. But meantime," he sighed, "how much better if you were like me, who never thinks—simply lives in the present moment."

"And how much better for me," Shepherd thought, "if that were true. . . ."

They finished the wine and the deck boy cleared the table. Savery yawned, slapping his melon of stomach. "Euh, I have enough lard here to live on for days. Alix says this trek will be good for me—but before I start working it off I will build up just a little more with a nap." He stretched like a fed animal and sought a comfortable place for a siesta. Soon he was asleep in a shaded chair, snoring with the sound of a wire screen being ripped.

The horrendous noise finally drove Shepherd back where the threshed water slid away from the stern. He sat for a time watching the river, letting the sun bake the soreness from the jab delivered by Savery's husband-and-wife reference to Alix. Gradually his tenseness eased. He dozed—and found himself in a morass which drew him deeper with each new effort to flounder free, strangling, straining futilely toward a ladder he could not quite reach.

He awakened an hour later, damp and shaken, with Savery's hand on his shoulder.

"This sun, old foolish—would you have your brains poached like an egg?"

He got up slowly, removing his helmet. "Snoozed off without knowing it." He snapped the sweat from his forehead. His mouth felt as though he had been sucking a piece of brass. Going to the water bag, he drank copiously, washing away the remnants of the disturbing dream. His strength came flooding back, and when he rejoined Savery he felt taut and rested, the dream's vapors banished.

He saw that the banks had started to widen, with the far one already dimmed with distance. Before them stretched miles of what looked like an inland sea.

"The entrance to Tonle Sap," Savery said pleasedly, "and in good time. I think this boatman will get his bonus."

"Quite a lake to be called something like Tonle Sap."

"Great Sheet of Sweet Water the natives translate. They love it dearly—and why not? In truth, it is the richest item in all Cambodia. At the first of the year it will drain out—to leave a rich deposit of slime for the rice fields, and permit thousands of fishermen to make a catch that helps feed hundreds of thousands more, with the rest stewed up in that nauseous nuoc-mam which flavors their diet. When the level is down, this whole area becomes mostly a mud flat cut through with canals. Is it not a good omen that we are here in floodtime, speeding above that swamp as though gods?"

"I'm sure our propellor'd say so. When do we turn off?"

"Farther up the lake. And again fortune is with us! Our river will help carry us along in friendly fashion—unlike the Mekong, for instance." He pursed his heavy lips. "If we had to go up Old Mother, she could be dangerous."

"The counterstream is that bad?"

"Difficult, yes—but a worse problem is the menace to our boat that she carries. You see," he explained, "teakwood logs are lumbered up near the Burma border, stamped with numbers, and set to float down hundreds of miles for handling. As it finds its way to the lowland one of those heavy cuts of timber also might find our thin hull, or the propellor you mentioned. And I have no wish for a wreck on that waterway, I can tell you!"

"Guerrillas?"

Savery nodded soberly. "There are many towns on the Mekong full of those fanatics."

"What about up this way?"

"Less built up—more free from the influence of the intellectuals."

"Then our only trouble could be from bookish natives?"

"You find odd sources of amusement," crossly. "Of course there are savages who need no persuasion to oppose us, but for the most part they are farther into Moi country. The Cambodian, uncorrupted, is apt to be a pleasant little fellow. But a

bug in the ear can bore into the brain. He can be led wrong by others of his countrymen—fellows who throw pebbles that can cause avalanches.”

“Like Ho Chi-minh?”

Savery looked at him sharply. “What do you know of him?”

“Well, that he has eighteen million Viet Nameese behind him.”

“And what of their precious free state?” he snorted. “Whole villages burned to the ground, railway tracks torn up, bridges down, rice scarce, canals wrecked. Hanoi, his capital, lost. And why? Because he had to spread his wings before he was ready.” He took a deep, angry breath and exploded, “Why did the old fool not send for me?”

Shepherd looked at him in such astonishment that Savery’s face hardened. “Yes—Paul Savery!” He jabbed tobacco viciously into his pipe. “I say this to you because when all is added we are the same breed of cats, with an eye for the main chance. Do you think that an old hand is blind to what could have been done? But look at his governing body, his Tong Bo—ten heads in the clouds who have missed it completely.”

“They’re still fighting.”

“They will lose,” flatly. “This is the only war France has now and she will win it. The right time was when the German was at her throat. There are some who will tell you the Viet Minh movement was due to the Japanese invasion. But I tell you that is not so, and any of your OSS officers who were here then will agree. Like waters, there are flood periods among peoples. That was the hour. Many of us felt it, knew, would have thrown in with him. But did he ask? Even answer feelers? No! He stayed with his green young men, with their hot air and no experience.”

“And you and your friends played along with Vichy like a lot of disenchanted pimps.”

The huge chest jerked against Savery’s shirt front, then slowly descended. “At times you are a difficult man, old Shep, but in truth you do have a tongue for the right phrase. Yes, that was it, exactly. The troops came—French and British, with Jap mercenaries. The settlement was made—one that could have led to

great things. But Ho Chi-minh and his absurd advisers would not bide their time. They hear voices in the bush. They believe they are messiahs. They resist more. And what happens? Everything right back where it started."

"Not quite."

"It will be, you will see! Remember that these new hands have not made their fortunes." He sighed. "I tell you I regret an opportunity like that. It would have been something well worth trying."

"The little Napoleons," Shepherd said. "Aaron Burr. Pancho Villa. Christophe. William Walker——"

Savery shrugged impatiently. "Allusions again. The critic again. Do you know what, my rascal friend? If I did not know with such surety that you are much like me, I would believe that you are idealistic. Oh yes," as Shepherd laughed, "like those stargazing fellows who should read the *Rubáiyát* instead of books that set them mad."

Humming at a chanson, he rolled off to confer with the boatman—before Shepherd could remind him that the Persian also had written:

Indeed the Idols I have loved so long
Have done my Credit in Men's Eye much wrong;
Have drown'd my Honour in a shallow Cup,
And sold my Reputation for a Song.

XIX

THE SUN had dropped heavily behind the mountains which cup the Tonle Basin. At its point of disappearance magenta splashes lay thick in the sky, as if it had fallen into a distant, violently colored lake. Savery had the boat moved in closer to shore. When he saw the top of a drowned tree showing above the water he ordered an anchorage amid its branches, for camouflage against speculative eyes. A few knots farther on was the mouth of the

river up which they would proceed with first visibility in the morning. It offered a landing near by, but he held that even this proximity to people required a night watch. While he did not foresee an attack, if one came they must be ready, and with fighting room.

His prudence extended to showing a cooking fire. The hamper provided a cold supper, wet down by a thermos bottle of coffee. When the boat was secure the Cambodians disappeared like brown shadows into the enginehouse. Too stimulated by a mounting sense of experience for sleep, Shepherd offered to stand the first hours of guard. Savery also appeared keyed up, but after a small brandy shambled off to his mosquito-net tent, like a wise soldier preparing for a patrol.

The moon was a silver hook stuck in the sky's floor. It gave a dim but sufficient light, and Shepherd got out his revolver for a cleaning. As he worked over the familiar bits of metal he realized how happy he was—the bad memories of Cairo gone and Saigon's receding like a track left behind. He felt young again, waiting to leap into the future as buoyantly as he had ridden his first squad car out toward Cicero and a holed-up gungel, in those long-gone days when detectives were the friends of a young reporter on the lobster shift.

He was conscious of the country beyond the bright-foil sheets of water holding their frail wooden island. In its bulky sweep were adversaries armed with claws, horns, fangs, stingers, and deadly cunning minds. It held confusing distances, poison carriers in many forms, snares, traps, dismaying secrets of assault—all summed up in the impenetrable spirit it gave off like an odor. It was closer now than it had been when he sensed its demanding lure on the deck of the *Clément Marot*, with a multiplied psychosomatic pull.

Even as at that time of first recognition there had been particular ingredients in it that were to affect him, so now others were in ferment. How additionally he would have been stirred to know that in Cholon a lonely Frenchman was rolling an opium pill. And that a tramp freighter was beating into the Gulf of Siam with a load of flesh-shattering explosives. And that

in the Sûreté building in Saigon a bureaucrat was frowning over a report, while somewhere north of the 16th Parallel a cagy old revolutionary examined a less explicit missive. . . .

As before, it is doubtful whether the essence of any of these incidents crossed space to join the spell that rolled to him from the waiting land. Jack Shepherd was no wizard with supernal powers to conjure, nor a free traveler in time. Thus he again settled for what he could feel close at hand—a promise of events that would bring him his own true passion.

Swinging an exultant fist at the dark, he whispered, "What have you got?"

His answer was so immediate that it made him laugh: another mosquito bit him. Presently their assault combined with stinging flies to force him under cover. Taking the net from his cot, he rigged it over a deck chair.

With a rifle straddling his knees, his pipe surrounding him with a smudge, for the rest of his vigil he reclined comfortably, alert for malevolent sounds. But the only noises that sifted through the hush were peaceful—the rustle and creak of their bower, cries from nocturnal fowl, water slapping against the hull, and the steady buzz of Savery's hampered breath.

In a few hours the hum of trapped bees abruptly stopped inside the Frenchman's screen. In a few moments he appeared, pulling on his clothes.

"Shep?"

"Who goes there?"

"Friend," he chuckled. "What of the night, sentry?"

"Nothing to report." Getting out of his shelter, he looked at his watch. "And I'm wide awake, if you want more sack time."

"No, you must get some now, if you already have not been stealing snoozes." His arm flung out a playfully melodramatic finger. "We march at dawn!"

Shepherd smiled, hearing in the growling voice an echo of his own wish to get under weigh. "Better wait for it here," he said, indicating the deck chair. "The midges are murder. I'll use your bunk."

With the words came an abrupt realization of how his atti-

tude toward Savery was changing. Lie on a bed still hot from that gross body? How impossible so short a time ago! Yes, he honestly was getting to like this wily transgressor, this squat, spiritually deficient desperado on whom he must depend in the days ahead. And who, he acknowledged, searching for the thermos bottle, was the best man for it yet unhung.

A cup in each hand, he was returning aft when he saw Savery's shoulders jerk forward as though he had been shot in the chest—his hands rise to clutch at his shirt front. In the half-light the heavy face was a harsh mask.

"Paul! What . . . ?" He was so certain that it was an arrow that, dropping the coffee, he felt for a shaft; but Savery shook his head doggedly.

"Nothing," he gasped. Tearing open his pocket, he took out a small bottle. "Water——"

Scooping up one of the tin cups from the deck, Shepherd filled it from the water bag and hastily returned to the bent figure hanging onto the deck chair.

Shaking a pill from the bottle, Savery gulped it and drank noisily. The medicine seemed to work almost at once, for he straightened, saying, "Euh!"

"Your pump?"

"No!" sharply. "A little gas only. I am fine now—you can go and get your rest."

"I'm not sleepy. Why don't you go lie——"

"No, no—it is nothing." He crept beneath the netting and slumped into the canvas seat. It was obvious that, a huddled dark blotch, he wanted neither ministrations nor more talk about the spasm, and after a minute Shepherd left him.

Locating the cot, he slid onto it fully clothed, his mind busy with the revelation. Bad hearts were, of course, no novelty among hard-living men. But to learn of one in a man of Savery's seeming soundness was like finding a worm in a healthy-looking fruit; its unexpectedness made it seem unreasonable, but once known called for a different view. He was thinking of the ramifications of the discovery when suddenly he was seeing filigreed gold enclosing a crude, stone fountain. From it sprayed orna-

ments struck from amethyst, carnelian, topaz, diamond, malachite, ruby, emerald, ivory, and jade—a livid, iridescent shower over an ivory coffin supported by crystal replicas of Alix and Bijou.

The engine's grunt bored into where he was seeking to read the legend on the beautiful casket, and brought him back to the shuddering deck. He raised the netting, to find that the night had dissolved sufficiently for Savery to get them started again. While he slept the launch had been untied, taken across the remaining open water, and started up the tributary.

"No use to get you up," Savery answered his protest. "As well, out of sight you were one less white man to be spotted from the landing."

"You're feeling all right again?"

"Perfectly, thank you." He again was so curt that Shepherd's certainty about his heart condition increased. And if it were a fact——

But dismissing all its concomitant aspects, including one of finding himself alone in a maze of trackless miles, he took breakfast. Fog shimmered like green gauze on the embankments, deeper where it was entangled in creepers and black soaked roots, pale when torn by unrestrained trees. An elephant crossed an indenture in the stream, a mahout perched behind his ears. Across his tusks a pile of trimmed stalks was pinned by his trunk—a good laborer on his way to his job with his lunch.

He smiled. How Peggy would have thought he was making it up to learn of the understanding among those tremendous organized beasts which gave them set hours, with appreciative attention at the end of the day's work. And though she might not have believed, considering their look of genial patience, how mean they could turn with their rights violated, her laughter would have been certain if she could see this representative of his guild when his chore was done—frolicking in the river while the man who lived on his neck scrubbed him, enjoying his pay like a miner his beer.

Peggy—with a jolt he found that he was thinking of her in the past tense, as though she were someone of whom he had been

fond a long time ago. Already, in just these few days, her outlines were blurred. Finishing his coffee, he frowned, hoping that Lem had her safely off to Shanghai.

He saw that Savery was beginning to shape up the inventory. He wondered: was Paul as forgetful of his ties, Alix dim and far away? Or if not of her, might it be of Peggy that he thought? It was peculiar, considering that first hectic show of interest, how rarely he now mentioned her. Good taste? Or an expedient disguise that hid an active want? But then, it could also be that his feeling for Peggy had never been truly compulsive—his attentions merely those warranted by her uniqueness in Saigon, a pretty stranger who had been sped from his mind by later events. This seemed the truest supposition of all, for the manner in which the mercurial man had thrown himself into the junket could leave little energy for thinking of the world of women in shoes.

Rising, he went back to help with the packing. Their supplies were largely in loose form, and as the morning waxed they arranged them for the first stages of the carry. The bulkier foods and what wine had been included would be the first used. These were put in bags and added to the tents, cots, blankets, and housekeeping utensils that would ease the preliminary stages of the trail. The concentrates, medical kit, and a small stock of brandy went into knapsacks to be shouldered when they had no porters. Savery had brought two rifles, his Mauser and a powerful, lighter express. They each had side arms, and an over-all though not burdensome fund of ammunition. Toward noon the whole outfit was tidy, familiarly placed, ready to go.

As Savery had prophesied, the river was friendly, with a winding course that quickly shut off any inspection from huts lodged like driftwood in the snarl of vine-enmeshed quagmires that edged it. While its high level submerged trees evident along the shore during low-water time, by keeping to mid-channel the boatman easily was able to avoid their grapnel branches. Once a scattering of logs floated dead ahead. But wheeling suddenly toward a sand bar, they appeared on it as a family of water buffalo, with a cloud of egrets that had waited for them to finish the bath flying shilly down to pick at their parasites.

Savery regretfully watched the cavalcade lumber off into the bushes. "A fair trophy," he shrugged, "but not truly sporting unless he is in the grass, wounded. Euh, let us eat again. My finger," he said sadly, "is beginning to itch as if I were not a pure hunter."

After lunch too light to be sleep-inducing he studied the map and announced that they soon should reach their stop. It was time to start obtaining bearers, which he would do alone. "I speak the language well enough to pass for a métis gentleman, and I do not wish the boys along to make exposing remarks if any prospects prove anti-French. On that score, Shep, it might be well that you keep out of sight. You are too tall to have Cambodian blood," as he turned away.

Presently a likely-looking source of recruits appeared—a short landing that jutted from a rip in the bank. Ordering the boat put in, Savery jumped onto the rickety flooring and strode leisurely to a small crowd gathered below a clump of pole-raised huts. Almost to it, he swept up a little naked girl and carried her the rest of the way, smiling and rumpling her hair.

To Shepherd, peeping from a hole in the enginehouse, it seemed that the eyes regarding him were neither hostile nor welcoming, but simply watchful. A woman ran out to take the child. The men closed around him, and in a moment he was the solid hub of a wheel of slender bare torsos.

The palaver continued for a few minutes, with Savery talking rapidly and the natives asking occasional questions. Then he started back down the wharf. Three men left the brown mass and followed him. Jumping back into the boat, he ordered it cast off. As the trio unfastened a canoe, Shepherd noted that one man in the crowd on shore was talking angrily among the silent rest.

"Looked easy," he said, coming out of the enginehouse.

Savery frowned. "There was a smart boy—there always is—whom I would have preferred to have along, just to keep my eye on. The others were willing enough to gain a little money."

"I guess it was he doing the yapping when we pulled out."

"I saw him—a suspicious devil. But I don't think the families

of those fellows"—he gestured to the trailing pirogue—"will let him run any bad word up ahead. That's why I'm glad they agreed to come. Mon dieu, Shep—this country has gone all to hell! You should have known it when I first came out. A paradise!"

"It's still beautiful."

"Oh, it looks the same, but the people—how they have changed." He was listening intently, as though for the first thumps of a message drum.

"Think there might be some jungle telegraph?"

"In truth, I hope not. We would make fine targets in all this light."

"Then we'll make our fight in the shade."

"Eh? What's that?"

"About a warrior who had to stand to a force of bowmen," he answered with a grin. "An aide pointed out how vulnerable they were—that the enemy's arrows were darkening the very sun. 'Then I'll make my fight in the shade,' the old guy said."

Savery grunted. "Book stuff. To me he was a damned fool," he threw over his shoulder, going forward.

It was such a totally unanticipated reaction that Shepherd stared after him. From the whole range of literature he would have taken that one bit to square with Savery's approval. And he had rejected it like a man concerned with fear.

But that couldn't be! He had shown no flinch at any moment of their hunting trip, and this expedition assuredly was no coward's suggestion. Then why?

He looked up the waterway that was carrying them deeper into the primordial wilderness, thinking back—of the anchor watch Savery had insisted be posted; of his suggestion that Shepherd's obviously white-man appearance be kept hidden at the landing; of the dearly paid-for admission that he could pass for a métis . . .

Slowly a solution began to form in his mind. Paul's precautions had been against indefinite foes, even as he now was apprehensive about an enemy that would not meet him face to face. His bravery had to do with the laying on of hands; the unknown

was an obscure adversary, more cause for alarm than any he could see or feel.

And yet again—why? His own life revolved around imagination. Could it be that was why he now was excited by the prospects of an ambush—because he had schooled his impulses toward wringing excitement from sources which offered deadfalls to undisciplined feelings? Did the untutored mind betray its vehicle into schoolgirl scampers from the mouse of strange peril?

And again—why? What peril? At the worst there was only death—no cause for fear. Death was no mysterious horror, but an easeful access to the great answer. Was Paul then, with all his zest, so incurious as to the final Q.E.D.? Did he really believe, as he once had said, that death is never pleasant? And had he never recognized that whatever the form his own particular prelude to it would take—whether with fatal breaks of skin, sickened heart, ruined brain, or blocked lungs—in the end there would be the same song and silence within the heart?

"You know what, Shep?" He was standing beside the deck chair, in his hands a Portuguese cutlass and a honing block. "I have been thinking about that old foolish you spoke of. No good man in a jungle, perhaps, but one with a point regardless."

"I got the idea you didn't go for him."

"His bravery, yes—his bravado, not at all." Sitting on the deck, he began delicately to stroke the blade over the stone. "What a piece of metal—properly treated, it will cut the eye that beholds it! To die?" he said after a few minutes of gentle scraping. "Very well—if it comes, it comes. But not before its proper time, or in a wrong way. You may put it down to my old appreciation of the present, but beyond all else I do not like to be made a fool of." He touched his tongue to the razored blade. "And no fear, if we are caught by a certain kind of these savages they will make fools of us."

"How?"

"First they will castrate us and then dig out our eyes. Or perhaps it is our eyes that they will dig out first."

"Nice boys."

"Oh, very! Yes, there are far worse things than just the cur-

tain itself. Your old fellow knew. Tonight when we make camp you will tell me more of him?"

Shepherd gave an appreciative laugh. Some unpredictable frog! "That's all there is to tell."

"Ah," with a sigh, "but that is people in books for you—intransitive. How much better are those we actually know."

"Sometimes. Only sometimes."

"Nonsense!" Putting down the cutlass, he got out his pipe. "Tell me, for instance, about when you first met our little Peggy. . . ."

X X

THE CHANNEL WAS narrowing, with patches of rock face showing through thin beards of vine. These Savery had been inspecting closely when suddenly he gave an exclamation and pointed to a slab which cut a bare, perfect triangle in a mask of close-growing shrubs. "There!" he cried, and commanded the boatman to bring the boat to the opposite bank.

With the same imperturbable skill that he had exhibited since the start the man turned into the designated spot. Savery and the deck boy, fore and aft, leaped ashore with deck lines. While they lashed them to trees Shepherd put over a boarding plank. The boatman cut his switch, and the holiday part of the journey was ended.

Savery gestured happily toward the blue-hot sky. "And with plenty of time for our start inland."

"Then let's get started before these boys have a chance to talk to the others."

"Correct! No palaver is good palaver."

Under their urgent lead the load was stacked on the bank by the time the pirogue rounded a bend in the stream. The boatman would receive his pay in Pnom-Penh, but he took the bonus with imperturbable thanks and turned the launch for

the trip back, as silent as before. Only a slight wave from the deck boy signaled an interest in the white men with whom they had lived for four days and whom they were leaving in this desolate place.

"I'd like to know what they're thinking," Shepherd said.

"Just as well not to. Funny people." He indicated how the men in the two passing craft were not greeting each other. "Country boys and city ones. They do not have much trust for each other, either."

"The whole world over."

The natives brought their canoe in to where the launch had been moored, but after a consultation dragged it farther along the bank. Despite his impatience Savery looked approving as they concealed it in a patch of weeds.

"They also believe in no unnecessary chances." When the trio returned he allotted loads, slipped on his own pack, and, cutlass in hand, started for a break in the matted curtain hanging over the high ground. The porters followed, with Shepherd behind as rear guard.

He felt easy and free beneath his haversack, its straps little more than ribbons holding a balloon to his back. The jungle was no vague menace now, but an active adversary. He eyed the great arcade of fromager trees challengingly, again wanting to make a show of defiance. And this time he had no foolish feeling for the taunt that slipped from his grinning lips, for now the opponent was more than an ethereal threat. It was—here!

After a careful study of maps and compass Savery had taken a fix. He obeyed it confidently, heading into the trees like a diminutive giant through platoons of legs of towering ones. When their dangling robes impeded him his weapon lashed out savagely. He set a hard pace, but held it steadily, referring at intervals to his pedometer.

Beyond the river the vegetation thinned out, and they passed without extraordinary interference through aisles of bamboo and banyan. Cicadas sounded loud over the rustle of palm fronds. Parakeets and monkeys jabbered at them incessantly. Occasionally the sound of larger frightened animals came in

faint crashes from off their path. Under the interlocking canopy of branches the party seemed to Shepherd to be a submarine spreading ripples of alarm through clear green water. Random wedges of sun slanted through openings in the lacy ceiling to illuminate echelons of mosquitoes and to push pools of shadow at the bases of trees into lopsided bulges. Yet the filtered light was still strong when Savery halted, his gaze fixed on the terrain ahead. After consulting his map he signaled for Shepherd.

"An even ten miles," as he came up, "and a good place for the night. Now let us see if these boys are anything but beasts of burden."

Shepherd put down the rifle and released his pack. They were at the edge of a clearing opposite what appeared to be a solid wall of timber. "Just as well to be fresh when we pitch into that."

"You observe more than a little, eh, old Shep?"

"Haven't you learned that yet?" Ready to call it a march though he was, his wish to create a habit in Savery had him add a pseudo threat: "Didn't I warn you about trying to cover up? Or maybe you'd like me to drop a note to the Grandes Chasses people that you're a hot——"

"But you took that back!" with an uneasy laugh. "However, I apologize—keeping things to myself for so long has been my way. You yourself know how that can be."

His point made, Shepherd's reply was to indicate the distant barricade. "What's this—the beginning of the tough stuff?"

"I fear so. I would have told you later—there is no need to dwell upon my one little error, even in jest." Still grumbling, he began a palaver with the natives.

Shepherd smiled; if he kept rubbing it in that he would brook no secretiveness, however trivial, Paul might eventually admit his right name! But until that last mark of confidence, or one like it, he knew that he could not be sure as to whether the devious rogue's attitude toward him was sham or secure. And upon that the whole future depended.

The natives had given hesitant answers to Savery's questions, and he turned from them with a frown. "As I thought, they are

greenhorns. Only the older one has been out before—with a party before the war.”

“It’s just as well. If they were experienced they might expect us to start hunting soon. We can show them what to do.”

“Right,” approvingly. “We want no smart boys. You take one for the tents, and I will get the others on the food side.”

The camp built quickly. Before dusk the storage tent was erected and the mosquito shelters hung over the cots. On a trestle of rocks Savery had prepared a meal. A short distance away the Cambodians were clustered around a large stewpot, cooking their rice.

“Not bad for a first night,” Shepherd said, filling his mess kit.

Like the primitive who relies as much upon supernatural means as his own, Savery waved his fork embracingly. “The gods are with us—agreeable that we share their ancient place. Ah,” as he sniffed at the purple dark, “for me there is no house like the jungle! So many rooms, and the best of all roofs!”

“It leaks. And there’re no screens on the windows. I’ll settle for something cozier.” Slapping at another mosquito, he took his food under the protection of his net.

“Effetel! Perhaps I should send for a little girl to warm your bed?”

“Thanks, but tomorrow there’s that big one across the way.”

“She will appear less formidable in the morning,” Savery declared cheerfully; but by the middle of the next morning it was apparent that his assurance was completely wrong.

From their first entrance into the dark mass it opposed them heroically. The trail broke only before a stubborn assault, and closed behind their passing majestically as a vault door. Shepherd led the file, developing a path that depended more on intuition than actual definition. For an hour he had been swinging the cutlass against a ceaseless waterfall of lianas. It was cruel going, with an element of despair in it. He had begun to feel like a blocking back who seeks to open a hole for a ball carrier in a fiendishly smart line; the defense was shifting against him as if it had figured the play.

Yet his efforts had a fee beyond the slowly forged progress. Urged by the furious physical pressure, his mind was racing so

fast that everything on the outside was slowing down. White and clear, it was a screen for a troop of images bubbling from his subconscious—ideas, memories, impressions that popped up like unexpectedly released corks. And then one exploded that sank all the rest, a forgotten story recalled by a clump of creepers growing in the rough likeness of a buddha.

He stopped short, the beat of his heart increasing. The Emerald Buddha of—what was that name? Yaçodharapura!

Great God! Might the trove they were seeking be the one that has haunted fortune hunters ever since the wrecking of Angkor? The old priest's everlasting secret?

"Shep—what is it?" he heard Savery call. He looked back. The bearers were squatting on their heels. Savery showed behind them like a plug at the end of a shaft in a green mine.

"Tell you later!" He was resuming his task when Savery quickly picked his way past the natives and joined him. His little eyes were bright in the shadow of his helmet, the Mauser ready.

"What is it?" he repeated.

Shepherd smiled. "Looks like you're not forgetting to cover me."

"Then it was nothing?" He examined the quivering block before them, his tautness easing as he found nothing disturbing. Pushing back his topee, he scraped a finger across his drenched brows. "Cover you? Indeed, yes! You think I wish to lose one who can buck like this? But what held you?"

"I just thought of something, that was all."

"It must have been important. Your arm stopped like in amazement."

"It occurred to me how nice it would be if we were on our way to the Emerald Buddha of Yaçodharapura."

Savery looked blank, but enough excitement had shown in his voice to catch him. "Of what?"

"I'll tell you later. We ought to whack out of this pretty soon, or it just never was a trail. We'll take a breather when it opens up enough for us to breathe."

"Good," with a nod. "Tiffin and a nice rest. There is no need

to drive ourselves while we still can be luxurious. Emerald Buddha, eh?" as he started back to his position. "I cannot wait!"

In another hour Shepherd had led them free of the immediate tangle. They entered a small glade floored with shallow grass. Unslinging his load, he dropped with it, blowing like an exhausted swimmer. The porters appeared in a few moments, and then Savery, exclaiming gratefully, "Euh! It is like coming out of a cave into the light." But Shepherd saw that his eyes were inspecting the surrounding fringe of foliage.

"Still worrying about that lad at the landing?"

"No—I think there would have been signs before this. Still, a watched pot rarely gets kicked over, no?" He gave the natives a few minutes, then put them to assembling the cots. "Use them while we have them, I say; to rest on the ground was never my favorite place." He killed a mosquito on his wrist and glared at the bloody smear. "Notably with these man-eaters about. . . . But this buddha, Shep—your words have been stinging me worse than they. What was its name?"

"Yaçodharapura . . ."

While the porters fashioned a camp he related his recollections of its history, first describing the encrustation of gems that had caused its label: "a sheet of emeralds so cleverly joined that the whole statue seemed one solid piece. Angkor was at its height then, as rich and cultured as any nation of the earth. But with time it had become less concerned with being the warrior state that had brought it such fantastic wealth and power—the same story that's repeated since the beginning of ambitious man. Meanwhile up in northern Siam were tribes lacking in gold, jewels, ornate buildings, and silk pavilions of little painted girls. Nor most of all did they have the weariness that comes from obtaining them, and their enjoyment. So these Thais banded together into one fierce donkey and started after the carrot dangling before its hungry nose.

"Word came of the expedition, but the Khmer military was too fat to be much alarmed. They had defeated every opposing force for so long that they thought themselves invincible. So they did not stand to arms and move out to let the battle join

away from the city, in the old way. They waited—and the Thais came closer.

"Their approach alarmed the head priest, if not many others in the decadent city. He went to the King, who also was getting the wind up, and pointed out that it was later than his indolent generals seemed to think—that this time the gods might fail them. The King realized that the warriors, great conquerors that they had been, had gotten out of hand, and that they were far less sharp than when they had swept all enemies. He listened to the old priest and agreed to his plan.

"All portable riches were stripped from the palace and temples, including the Emerald Buddha, and taken to a hiding place which only the priest and the King were to know about. When everything was there, and the place sealed and disguised, the slaves who had assisted in the job were killed. And then the Thais came.

"Well, the slaughter was pretty complete—including the two holders of the secret. The rest were led away as slaves. Angkor was wrecked. Over it crept the jungle from which only in recent years has it partially emerged. And somewhere that fabulous treasure is still hidden——"

"Oh, of course," as Savery gave a little moan, "it may be just a fable. The Thais, poor, ignorant, half-starved barbarians, must have gone mad with their victory. They might have started to fight among themselves over the spoils, with much being lost and much more run off into the bush or deserted. In Bangkok even now there is a green-colored buddha claimed to be the Emerald Buddha. But nevertheless, down through the centuries a rumor has persisted that the Thais never got their pillaging hands on the main loot they came for. . . ." His voice trailed off. He shrugged as if to discount all that he had said, letting it be just a whimsey to fill an idle period.

But Savery was staring at him, breathing hard through the mouth. "Mon dieu, Shep! Even if that buddha at Bangkok is the one—and I have seen it, so know that it is not emeralds at all—what of the rest? Suppose, just suppose, that the old priest got away with even a part of such a treasure—just even a small

part!" He choked, and flung himself back on the grass, staring up at the sky.

Shepherd, his own pulse hammering, said nothing. Voiced in these surroundings, the old tale sounded so probable that, needful of any activity that would beat down his surging imagination, he jumped up and went to prepare their lunch. Using the last of the eggs for an omelet, he reinforced it with a tin of salmon and took a bottle from the wine sack. Savery answered his call almost sullenly, as though loath to leave his engagement with what he had just heard. He ate rapidly and without his usual loquacity, and silence took them rapidly through the meal.

When they had finished Savery motioned to the cots. "Start your nap, old yarn spinner—this morning you earned it. I will attend the cleaning up. In all truth, how could I now sleep?"

With the trek's resumption he elected himself its spearhead. He passed hastily, almost scornfully across open places to hack at closures as if they guarded his heart's desire. A striped cat sprang from one dense thicket and streaked off like a line of electric light. Another flushed a troop of Eld-deer. But he bored on like a voracious maggot in a ripe carcass, forcing himself and his trailers so unrelentingly that Shepherd began to believe his seizure on the boat truly must have been nothing. By now, a faulty heart should have pulled apart like wet tissue paper!

Only once was his progress retarded, and then briefly. He was just emerging into a small patch of weeds when Shepherd saw him give a backward leap and draw his revolver. The big hard gun in the big hard fist flung up and drew down—but it did not explode. Instead of the betraying shot Savery made lunging motions, waving his arms. Then, turning a white grin, he beckoned and went ahead.

Shepherd had to prod the stricken porters. "Naga!" one muttered, uncounted centuries of serpent worship in the word.

"No naga!" as he pushed them again. "Allez!" They hurried gingerly past the place where the reptile had disappeared, with Shepherd adding two more bits of information to his file on Paul Savery: he could think in the middle of reflex action, but he handled a pistol like an old-fashioned policeman.

Night was clogging like velvet moss in the tripods of the gaunt white fromagers when finally, with a regretful yielding to common sense, Savery admitted that they should continue no farther.

Hot and worn, Shepherd sank down against a palm tree. Miles back he had begun to reverse his opinion of the doctor in Pnom-Penh; his hip was throbbing as though from a branding iron, and only his boast on the boat had kept him from asking for a respite from the increasing torture. Pulling down his pants, he ripped the bandage loose. The skin was puffed angrily around the half-healed cut.

Occupied with the porters, Savery had not noticed his failure to assist, but he now came, frowning. "What?" as he bent over the reddened blotch. "It is still troublesome?"

"Ask the boys to boil some water, will you?"

"I thought it was all right."

"Don't worry, it won't hold us up."

"Of course I wasn't thinking of that! Mon dieu, do you think I am quite without sympathy?" Without waiting for a reply he started hastily back to the fireplace, calling to the porters.

Shepherd smiled ironically. One thing was certain—he had spun few other yarns so effective as that of the Emerald Buddha of Yaçodharapura! He was irked—by Savery's ill-concealed fear of being delayed rather than its cause, and that a part of his trusted body should fail. Yet his annoyance did not persist beyond the relief brought by a series of hot compresses. With a recession of the swelling the pain left, and after a peaceful night he felt no cause to deny Savery's eagerness to continue—could even smile at the anxiety in his greeting:

"How do you feel this morning, Shep?"

"Perfectly, thank you. It is nothing."

Hearing his words on the boat half mockingly returned, Savery gave him a suspicious glance. "You are not being just a foolish tough guy, eh?"

"Strike the camp. I'll sing out if it begins to bother me." He hesitated, then said, "It'd be silly not to say so," feeling older.

XXI

AT THE EDGE of a scum-covered rivulet Savery sat down with the maps open on his lap. The bearers dropped immediately in their tracks. Shepherd lighted a cigarette, puzzled. They had been walking for not more than an hour through a surprisingly unantagonistic region. The sky was like a young girl sleeping, flushed but with a cool sweet breath. Torn flags of fog still hung in the trees, and only early birds were limbering their throats. Their progress had been so good that, considering Savery's tactic of exploiting success, it seemed an odd time to tarry.

He jumped up as Shepherd approached, his nostrils pumping like small bellows. "We have hit along so well it is wonderful!" He indicated a small plateau that showed beyond the thinning trees. "That height is a marker which says that now the boys should be dismissed."

"Oh? Well then, let them go."

"The only thing—you are certain your injury is no ~~more~~ cause for trouble?"

"I said not to worry. If it goes bad I can always walk on my hands."

"No fear of that!" with a dutiful laugh. "Not while I am here to carry you."

"No fear of that either."

"Good! Ah, Shep—just imagine what might be so close to us! Fancy being among the rich of the world!" He stood for a moment, his face working. "What I could do with much money."

"Don't start counting on it yet!"

"How right you are," he admitted soberly. "Yes, first things first." Summoning the Cambodians, he gave them their wages, the pot they had been using, the largest water canteen, and what remained of the heaviest and most cumbersome food. He

shook his head when Shepherd suggested that they might as well have the cots as well.

"Their religion forbids them to sleep on a camp bed. And if they tried to sell them some garde militaire might pick them up and ask questions."

The porters filled the canteen from the stream and were gone among the trees, moving much faster than at any time during the past two days.

"Here goes comfort," Shepherd said as they began to redistribute the loads. To their own packs, already containing the concentrated portion of the larder, they added what they were to take from the bulkier piles. Of the sleeping equipment they kept only their nets and blankets. Stripping down the cooking utensils, they rolled the surplus with the grill and cots into the storage tent. Savery regretfully added the heavy leather gun cases to the pile; from now on both weapons would be carried with shoulder slings. The lot they then buried with what remained of the wine at the base of a fromager. Blazing it, Shepherd secreted the ax and a camp shovel under the leaf mold of a second tree.

"A waste of time if they've sneaked back to watch us," he said when they were ready to leave.

"No, I think they are streaking for their river as if devil beasts were after them. We have come farther than I promised, and they doubtless would have deserted soon. They do not like this country." He smiled. "It can be too full of strange things."

"Well, let's go find out."

"You're all okay?"

"Let's go find out."

Their loads were larger now, but the anticipation which held them both offset the additional weight. Forging the stream, they started up the gradual slope on the other side. The undergrowth loosened as they mounted to higher ground, and they were able to move with a freedom which Savery promptly accepted. He took the rise so rapidly that an hour later he reached the summit, running the last few yards like a great hasty turtle.

It was several minutes before Shepherd caught up with him. He was studying the maps again, shooting quick perplexed squints at the reaches beyond. "A little error, it seems. This is not the hill. It is the one over there." He pointed across a broad defile to where another elevation showed a bald pate above a dark green fringe. "Oh well, so far we have been right on the nose."

As he started immediately down the other side Shepherd followed—with the ache resuming in his leg that for the past few miles had been clutching with hot, relentless fingers. The descent into the valley was tolerable, but by the time he attained the second summit his teeth were locked. He saw Savery, rocking like a corpse fixed in water, looking tensely through his binoculars—heard him shout. The beating pain abruptly stopped, and he hurried across the crest without limping.

"There—look! That lump between those breasts!"

His hands were shaking so that at first nothing showed in the glasses but a blurred mass of foliage no different from any that surrounded it. Then he picked up a spot lighter than the rest and, concentrating on it, saw, near the top of a high mound in the division of two swelling hills, a brief scrap of undeniable texture. It was stone laid upon stone.

He lowered the glasses. The sky was spinning like a blue top.

Savery was gasping as though in thin air, his conqueror's nose jutting toward the temple. "It may be there, Shep—the means of power. Real power," he added in the same soft, exhilarated tone. "The greatest thing in all the world!"

They seemed alone at the top of a quiet world, with the moon in reach. Power? Yes, that must be his main, luring end—even though he had the facile knack of being able to enjoy himself on the way to it. He thought of his illusion at the start of the trip, that it was the venture that pulled Savery, not the prize. Now he saw it was both, and neither. The prize was but a gateway to his big love.

And for himself? He clenched his hands, his voice rising across the stillness. "Let's go——"

Savery started. "Euh! Yes, why are we waiting?"

Shouldering their packs, they plunged down toward the entangling greenery that swept surflike up the hill to meet them. Reaching it, they drew their knives as though meeting an assault wave. The sun began to ricochet from the blazing blades. Blinded with sweat, clouded with a swarm of stinging flies, hampered treacherously by their awkward loads, they rooted parallel tunnels through the resistant waves of tree-supported creepers.

Their objective grew larger, became just another hill nestling in the cleavage between two larger ones. Seen from the ground, and without the clarifying binoculars which had exposed it, its identity as a man-made structure merged again with the jungle which had accepted it hundreds of years before.

Swearing, thrashing at the fixed hindrances as though they were mobile defenders, Savery forged to it. Slowed down by the throbbing that now was driving through him with the steady beat of a machine, Shepherd fought along desperately behind him. When with a final lunge he broke free of a final hedge of vines, he saw Savery lumbering across a small glade. At its far end was what seemed a tall pyramidal mound solidly grown with shrubs and liana-infested trees.

He was staggering toward it when he heard an agonized cry. Savery was standing before a cave at the foot of the front slope, frozen like a setter at point. Then suddenly he whirled and pitched down on the grass, his hands digging at it, screaming.

Shepherd lurched past him, feebly drawing his pistol. Then he saw that nothing within the tunnel had caused the outburst. Beside its entrance was a rusted tin sign which proclaimed a national monument under the protection of the French government.

"I'll run her out of the country," he heard Savery yell. "I'll tear her guts out!"

"Do both, and I'll help." With an effort he freed his straps and entered the carved doorway. Enough light came through it to reveal that the room beyond was high and narrow, a gloomy slot with former window openings blocked with a growth like intestines. Roots had pried between the stones, but apparently

so slowly that they acted as bindings rather than bars to pry the structure apart.

Swaying, through combers of nausea he saw that the archaeological team had covered it thoroughly; not one object remained within the empty space. The floor was clean except for a pile of rubble. The walls were unworked, to indicate that even at its peak it had been only on the order of a country church. Its isolation might have caused it to be selected as a secret storehouse, he realized, but aside from that its only interest was the quirk which had preserved it while so many of its elaborate fellows had become heaps of tumbled stones. There was a dagger dance in his leg as he vomited.

He was able to make it outside before the flashing lights behind his eyes struck him to the ground. He rolled onto his side, his lips pulling bitterly from his teeth. With the map proved as worthless as he had first suspected, he found fully that he had let hope, that traitorous chimera, lead him on.

Savery pushed himself up and came over to stare at the metal placard. "Conservation et Protection des Monuments Historiques!" He turned, ugly lines creasing his face. "I do not seem to have much luck with you, at that, eh?"

Shepherd heard his voice, enraged but faint, make an impossible suggestion, terminating with—"you bad-losing bastard!" And as Savery's face floated down, "Go ahead, you no-good ape! I'm on my back again—why don't you kick my head in this time?"

"Shep! Mon dieu, Shep!"

"Don't Shep me, you illiterate sucker! You and your misbegotten maps!" Then the pain surged up to drive his eyelids shut, but not so tightly that tears could not seep from them.

Through the flashing dark he heard the snap of a lighter. A cigarette came pushing at his lips. Opening his eyes, he sat up. Savery was cross-legged beside him, lighting his pipe.

"I'm sorry."

Savery shrugged. "For what? I myself gave way—and but released your natural safety valve."

"Well, at least I didn't call you a hot gun again. For the rest

I'm sorry, as I said. But why credit the gods when things are going good and lay it on me when they turn sour?"

"An undeniable point," with an answering smile. "And as to the, ah, hot words, I am afraid that they contain too much truth. Especially the observation that I was made a sucker."

"Everybody's a sucker for somebody." He was recalling his anticipation at meeting the jungle, and it continued to shame him that the pain, and a wrecking of faith in his absurd story about the lost trove of Angkor, had been big enough to banish it. Was the mirage of money then becoming greater than his old love for new experiences? Was he slowing up that much?

"Of what are you thinking, old Shep?"

"Time, I guess—and what it can do."

"Eh?" puzzledly. "You look so woebegone I thought it might still be of our being anticipated here. And how useless that would be! One cannot lose what he never had. We are no worse off than we were, and there will be other projects." He stood. "Shall we see what souvenirs our predecessors might have left for us?"

"Sure." He started to rise, but fell back as a fiery bolt seared down his leg. Savery looked at him quickly.

"Your wound again?"

He nodded. "That walking on my hands may be no joke yet." Undoing his belt, he drew down the shorts and removed the bandage. The skin around the wound was purplish, tight as a drumhead. A sheen of suppuration lay within the edges of the dark gash. But there were no red streaks radiating toward his trunk, he noted thankfully; no indications of blood poisoning. At least not yet.

Savery made a low sound in the back of his throat. Straightening, he hurried to a dead tree lying across the glade and chopped off an armful of wood with his cutlass. He quickly built a fire on a stone slab outside the doorway, braced it with rocks, and set the last of their water to heating in the one pot they had retained.

Shepherd watched him with increasing lassitude. The burst of energy which had brought him the final distance to the stupa

had, with the mingled emotions which had followed, disguised a mounting fever. But during the few minutes' rest it had been forcibly revealing itself. His eyes ached in a buzzing head. His mouth was dry as lint. Iron clamps were tightening around him, hot and breath-taking, squeezing out all cognizance.

When he returned Savery had the water and a packet of compresses. "Wet these and apply them for a while," briskly. "They will localize the infection."

"You sound like a Red Cross manual."

"Just hope I remember when I incise you, old son." Giving him a sulfa tablet, he hastened off—"to bed us down before it becomes dark."

Shepherd began to apply the fomentations. Through a haze he could see his hands, as though through the wrong end of a telescope, dip the plats of gauze in the solution and transfer them to his hip. It seemed that his fever was increasing, and a timeless time later he gave a sudden laugh.

Savery came hurrying. "What?"

"There's a croaker in Pnom-Penh you could call if I'd paid my bill. It's a good idea to pay bills. I must try it some time. . . ."

"A croaker?" Savery looked at him queerly. "Mon dieu, but Americans are a morbid people! Come, if you are going to die, at least do it on the bed I have fixed."

The effort of moving brought a resurgence of agony and he fell gratefully on the blankets spread on a pile of leaves—"just like the Ritz, no?"

"According to English law," in a loud, faraway voice, "a hotel is a house where a traveler is furnished with everything he has occasion for while on his way. Ask room service to send up another stupa for another stupe!"

Savery injected him with the medical kit's morphia unit. Still frowning, he put a fresh edge on the knife from the Chinaman's shop in Pnom-Penh and sterilized it with the flame of his lighter.

"This may hurt a little."

"What doesn't? Tell me that, you noisy burglar!"

"Il ne voit que la nuit," as he released the pus formation.

When it had drained he cleansed the opening with more of the disinfectant. Sprinkling it with sulfa powder, he tied on a dressing and gave a grunt of satisfaction. Then he hurried out again, to stir up some soup in his mess tin.

Shepherd murmured that it tasted like hippo sweat, but soon after drinking he dozed. For a time he was vaguely aware of Savery changing the compresses. He slept fitfully, floundering on a plain of insurmountable objectives. A thumping like that of a harassed heart accompanied his efforts, diminishing at times, louder at others. Once it stopped and he came awake. In his ears was the echo of another sound, as if he recently had been shouting, "Peggy! Peggy!"

Through the mist beyond his eyelashes he saw Savery, silvered with moonlight, bending above him. "I'm here, Shep," he heard. "Here's your little Peggy, right here beside you." Then he felt a hand like a hoof gently brush the hair back from his forehead. "Sleep, now. Peggy is here."

Just before he slid into a cool slumber he wished that it was not Paul Savery whom he had to kill.

XXII

SHEPHERD came slowly awake with large splashes dripping on his face through the mosquito net. His first consciousness was that the pain had stopped. He felt his forehead. It seemed no more than normally warm beneath the wetness. The thumping had stopped. For a happy minute he lay in the peace of a new dawn, listening to the dull drumfire on the outflung mansions of foliage. The rain's beat was increasing on his own thin roof as it worked more persistently down through a sheltering tree. He prodded tentatively at his injury. It did not hurt much, and there was only a twinge of soreness as he got off the cot. Rolling up the blankets, he pulled on his raincoat and ducked out of the rapidly soaking tent.

Beside it, Savery's was empty. His eyebrows lifted, but then he saw him scrambling for the temple, laden with gear. Picking up the damp blankets, Shepherd pulled the nettings free of the branches to which they had been strung and hurried across the downpour. He limped but slightly.

Savery was just emerging as he reached the entry. "One minute dry, the next drowned!" he complained jovially, but, passing him, Shepherd saw that his face was serious.

Beyond the half-light that reached for a few feet inside the doorway the barren room was draped with shadows. Musty with the reek of centuries, the air was as empty of life as though it were the used-up breath of long-dead devotees. It drove him back close to the portal. He was examining his injury when Savery, shaking himself like a wet dog, entered with a knapsack neglected in his hurried sweeping together of the equipment.

"The raincoats were fortunate," he declared with a forced heartiness that became a bit more authentic as he saw how Shepherd's hip had improved. The swelling had reduced, with the purplish-red color softened to a semblance of acute but not untrustworthy irritation. "Good! With the infection relieved it promises to behave. How is the pain?" When he learned that it was gone his spirits seemed to rise another notch; then the secret look of worry came back and he cried out against the weather. "In the middle of getting breakfast the heavens seemed to think that we should have a douche."

"Well, we've a good place to wait it out."

"I am not so sure. . . ." He frowned absently, saying, "I would have roused you, but it came so suddenly that my first thought was to get the food inside before it expanded." He frowned more deeply, looking at the damp sacks. "Still, at least you are better. That is something."

"Yes—but what's it with you, good Doctor?"

"Oh, perhaps a small thing—perhaps nothing. So the pain has let up?"

"Yes, and the fever too, I think. Last night my head was beating like a tom-tom—" He broke off at the other's startled expression. "Or maybe that wasn't fever?"

Savery hesitated, then gave a small hard grin. "Not unless I had one as well. It was the drums, old son."

"Whose, do you think? The ones you were talking about—with the bad habits?"

"I wish that I could say. Of course this is pacified territory, so called, but——"

"One never knows, eh?"

"Never about anything in this country of subhuman depravities! In usual times the tribes in this tract are easygoing enough," he added with less heat; "not so fierce as the Mois by half. But——"

"These are not usual times."

"In truth, not by less than half." Then he made a gesture that Shepherd recognized—answering the goad of bothersome thought with physical movement: he picked up his cutlass and went out the door, calling back, "I must get some still-dry wood or we will have nothing hot."

Shepherd replaced the bandage and lit a cigarette. His gaze roving the room, he wondered if they were thinking the same thing—that two modern men with all their fund of sophisticated lessons, inherited knowledge, and mechanically perfect shooting irons were no match for a pack of scabby savages who knew nothing of what they so laboriously had been given to know, but whose leaf-screened bows and blowpipes could knock them off like sitting birds? This ancient place—erected to belief in a mystic power by the forebears of squalid creatures who even now might be peering at them with malignant curiosity—was it to be their tomb?

Yet how to prevent it? "Don't molest us—we are friends!" How empty, even if they could understand; and how untrue. The interloping pink man was rarely a friend, these people had found. And he, who looked as much like a despoiler as the rest, might have to pay something down on their account.

"Like hell," he said aloud, standing up.

The rifles were leaning against the wall, evidently stored the night before. Checking them, he found that Savery had gone over them since their foray through the brush. Both were clean

and fully loaded, with the safety catches released. When Savery brought in an armful of wood he asked if they were in that much danger of ambush. "If so, we'd better clear out."

"You believe you are that ready to start again?" quickly.

"I am if you're as worried about staying here as you look. I'd a lot rather hit the road than get cut down in this cobra nest. You think there's a good chance of that, don't you?"

"Oh, not with any assurance, of course, but——"

"Let's eat and blow."

"In truth, I am glad that you feel that way, Shep. Those drums might have been about something else, but if not—well, they might expect us to be coming here. It is obvious that this temple is not entirely unknown," he said with a dry grin.

As they talked they made a fire and cooked a meal of tea and powdered eggs, then started the final weeding out of their packs. Only the ammunition was kept intact. Changing their clothes, of the remainder they kept only the socks. Shepherd proposed to leave the blankets and nets as too cumbersome to trouble with farther. "It won't be the first time for either of us to sleep on the ground, and the mosquitoes that bite us may not have bitten anyone with malaria. At least I'd rather risk it than cart mine any farther. They snag more than a four-handed outfielder."

"What a language," Savery muttered; "but your point is understandable." They also decided to leave the largest canteen, and set the cooking pot outside to catch rain water. Medicating it, they filled a pair of small containers which, with two flasks of brandy, might have to suffice for their drink.

"Unless we again are assisted by the skies we must emulate camels," Savery prophesied. "This may be our last fire."

"Then let's drop the meal mush too. It's bad enough wet."

"But so sustaining! Why, once I was in a place——" He stopped abruptly, mumbling, "But there are some things better forgotten." On the floor changing shoes, he saw Shepherd glance at his ankle. He scowled and shook his head. "Not Devil's Island, no bloody fear! Are you thinking that perhaps I might have done a bit of time, old inquisitive?"

"Well, haven't you?"

"Of course not! Because I can find interest in a myth does not mean that I am quite all stupid!"

It was clearly a slip; he was angry, and more than a little suspicious. Shepherd cursed behind an easy smile. He might automatically be on guard now, with a lessening of that needed chance, over somewhere near Angkor. . . .

Suddenly Savery went on: "Beside, there are many places where leg irons are not used, even if one were French in his more careless days." He paused, then added abruptly: "I was born in Corsica."

Shepherd gave a calculated shrug. "We all have things to live down. Once I was called Maloney," he said, and wondered if Tuey Fung had as yet made any inquiries about his charming visitor.

"And you think that being a Corse is dishonorable?" Savery flared. "Believe me, I have no shame that mine was Pasquale Paoli Allorge!" A look of such astounded surprise, followed by one of dark dismay, came into the blunt face that Shepherd thought it should be he who had best not turn his back.

"Euh! Not even Alix knows that!"

"Well, she doesn't know about Maloney either."

"In all truth we trust each other much, eh, old Shep? Or perhaps too much?" with a quick, buried glance.

Their haversacks were ready. Shepherd slipped his on for trial. It was heavy but not unwieldy. Going to the doorway, he saw that the rain was still streaming down in sheets.

"Good for ducks. And also, if I may, those who have to duck."

Savery sighed perplexedly. "I fear that I never shall learn English. My instructor informed me that the pun is the lowest form of humor in your language—yet you, a man of letters, use it without shame."

"My shame apparatus is worn out—fortunately. But anyway, our drumming friends aren't apt to be out in this, are they?"

"No," with a show of satisfaction. "The Cambodian is a pretty sensual fellow. They are likely to be holding snugly to their huts, with the wattles up."

"Then wattle be a better time to start traveling?"

"Jesus Christ," Savery said, and they went out into the rain.

Both were in good humor, pleased to be in action that might release them from a prospective trap. Savery had his bearing calculated and, as he had done at the river, picked it up resolutely. Leaving the glade at its shallow end, they entered a bamboo thicket. The matted soil was loaded with water that squashed out in jets beneath their feet. It made the only sound beyond the rattle of the rain on the great cape of leaves. All the customary jungle noises were stilled, with no sign of life other than that presented by their flight. The spongy earth absorbed their tracks as soon as they had been exposed, returning the great floor of humus to its natural state with impassive and almost insulting speed.

They knew that this was in their favor; they were leaving no trail. Yet though it was no time for vainglory, their impotence to affect a condition which had and would have existence for thousands of years on each side of their passage was as dampening to ego as the impersonal cascade from the skies to their puny prints.

"I feel diminished," Savery admitted when they stopped under a banyan for a drink of brandy. "I should like to yell, or shoot something."

"Easy! Thoughts are things."

"But, mon dieu, what a cavern of solitude!"

"Solitude never strung anybody up by the thumbs."

He shrugged. "L'excès en tout est un défaut. Let's go."

Abruptly, a faucet turned off, the shower stopped. Birds and monkeys promptly appeared in the jeweled trees. Through a surplice of fog the sun started to shine like a vast incandescent bulb. It stippled the clean-bathed greens in muted light and accented the sturdier browns beneath. Twisted roots shone black as ivory. Ripening flowers glowed with the flesh tones of orchidaceous women; still, fragrant, incontinent. For a brief, fresh time the whole landscape was new as first love; then gradually it began to steam with the wanton luxuriance of the union. The air became heavy and mucid, thick in the lungs of

the hurrying men. Their clothes became soggy, mud-plastered to the knees. Their packs grew as though fed by Wonderland cake. And Shepherd began to feel a warning in his thigh, dreadful and familiar.

He was about to call for a rest when Savery, a few feet ahead on a semblance of trail that had opened in the underbrush, threw himself back so violently that his feet slipped and he fell into the pulpy mud. He jumped up at once, his head thrust forward peeringly. Reaching him, Shepherd found him examining what his quick movement had avoided. Stretched neck-high between two trees was a strand of rattan into which had been woven a bristle of small strong thorns. A slight glint of reflected sun had given a last moment's warning; another step would have laid his throat open like butter.

Savery looked at the vicious line, almost imperceptible against a bending wall of quivering leaf shadow. "Euh! A good thing it was not raining, or dark!" Pale blotches mottled his ruddy cheeks.

"This path did seem a little too good to be true."

"Yes—we should have suspected it." He examined the ties which held the obstacle, but rain had washed away any evidences of age. Tightly strung, the fibers were clean and uncommunicative.

"Could it be for deer?" Shepherd asked. "Or gaur maybe?"

"I have not seen one like it before," slowly. "I have heard that the Stiengs use such a device to guard the approaches to their villages, but it very well could be for other animals than us."

As he spoke his glance continued to probe the encompassing underbrush, the big Mauser cocked loosely in his hands.

"It also could be that they did spot us, rain and all, and chased over here to put it up," Shepherd said. "If so I'd say it's a good sign. Otherwise they could have taken us before this, or even while we're standing here beating our gums."

"That is what I was waiting for," with a grim nod. "If they are out there—decided to shoot—it would do no good to run. But if they are afraid to, they might have thought to let us do

ourselves in on tricks like this, or spikes, a score of others." He nodded again, as if their agreement had convinced him. "As you say, not having heard from them so far is hopeful."

In his voice was a tinge of disappointment that implemented Shepherd's excitement. He smiled—recognizing that behind all his caution Savery too was finding a thrill in the teetering situation—but briefly. This was the kin spirit he was to destroy—yet done, would it be any more than a cheap form of suicide?

O, Thou, who didst with pitfall and with gin
Beset the Road I was to wander in . . .

He glanced up from lighting a cigarette. Thumb at nose, Savery was wagging his fingers at the booby-trapped path, again finding aptness in his poet:

"Thou wilt not with Predestined Evil round
Enmesh, and then impute my Fall to Sin!"

Shepherd's expression became heavier. "Come on, Omar——"

Backtracking a few yards, they began a loop that swung around the snare, then straightened out in their former direction.

The new course was obdurate, but proved safe. By dusk they had encountered no more threats. They made a cold camp and, huddled in adjoining root alcoves of a giant fromager, took alternate periods of sleep. Nothing disturbed the night—tribesmen, animals, or notices of danger from either. Before sunrise they were started again. Savery figured that before nightfall they should reach Siem Reap, the township which held Angkor, and they pressed on toward it with increasing confidence. Both the drums and the strand of thorns seemed far back and perhaps not pertinent to them at all.

Although the protests in his leg had resumed during the later part of the previous afternoon, they had disappeared during the rest hours—so completely that during the morning's march he came to believe that they would not return. His only trouble now was in his mind, a confused and confusing jelly of badgering thought. He kept looking at where the back of Savery's neck

showed between his helmet and the top of his pack. Square, red, an unmissable target . . .

He stopped on the bank of a flat stream, watching him start across, farther up. Near by a log was eddying in a fugitive current. Were there crocodiles in these waters? And what actually would he do, he asked himself rocketingly, if that log suddenly showed teeth?

But Savery gained the opposite bank unmolested and started up a tilted shelf of sand toward a parade of moss-festooned trees. With a small sigh he waded into the olive water, where it flowed over a sand bar. He was in the middle of the shallow projection when he felt his feet taken as though by a pair of huge, deliberate hands. He jerked violently with his right leg, unavailingly. The added weight sank the left to the knee.

"Shep!" Savery had turned and was watching him.

"Quicksand!" Knowing that to fight it would but take him deeper, he quelled a frantic desire to kick, thrash wildly. Shrugging out of his shoulder straps, he rid himself of pack and rifle and ripped at the buckle of his ammunition belt. With his knife and revolver it too fell away. Thus lightened, he sank more slowly—but he was almost thigh deep when Savery reached the bank behind him.

"Do not exert yourself!" he shouted. "I will make a rope!"

Over his shoulder Shepherd saw him hack furiously at a mass of long vines, jerk them loose, and start twisting them together. Despite his raging impulses he was holding himself still, feeling the pull inch slowly higher.

And thus he had a moment of revelation so perfect, so clear and finished, that all panic left him as though carried off by the quiet waters of the endless stream which held him so ineluctably. He was not afraid. Rather he was—curious—awed—on the verge of discovery.

Then, raised up and looking down at himself, he realized that of all the many times in which he had met hazard this was the first with an element of time in the meeting. It brought his first opportunity to think about, analyze, the exultation which even now was raging through him—to let him know why he had com-

mitted himself so carelessly those other, thoughtless times. He was, this fatal moment of waiting told him, the true, ultimate adventurer, the disaster-seeker impelled by his own peculiar intimations of immortality. It was not life at which he had been hurling himself across the years. It was death.

And so, with that faced and accepted—why not go on? Take himself and all of his useless self down to where he no longer could give the hurts which seemed to be his one solid talent—let these aged, incontestable sands have their way before he betrayed the man who even now was desperately seeking to save him?

“Here I come, old Shep——”

He lifted his head to see Savery splashing across the sand bar. “Go back! Paul, go back! Back——”

“Merde,” Savery said, and flung his handicraft. Even before it had looped around Shepherd’s shoulders his short legs were hurdling back over the treacherous sands. Grabbing up the vine ends on the bank, he ran them around a tree and, using it as an anchor, began to strain at the tough vines, crying, “‘So when that angel of the darker drink at last shall find you by the river brink’—pull, you big no-good of an ape! Pull, you mired moose of a sucker!”

His mighty hauling sawed into Shepherd’s back, throwing him flat in the water. Grabbing the slippery strands, he drew against their taut pressure. With his weight thus supported he was able to combat the vise on his legs without danger of slipping deeper. At first they were held as fast as before—but slowly and laboriously the rigidity gave way a little. He fought harder, all of his previous thoughts burned away by the prospect of escape. The combined forces gained momentum. He came farther, and a few fierce minutes later he was lying on the bank, gasping, exhausted, but with the life regained which he had been so close to forfeiting.

“Much obliged,” he said when breathing was not knives in his chest.

“For nothing——”

“Yes,” wryly. “Sorry about your gun.”

"It was only a gun. In truth, we might not have encumbered ourselves with them at all——" Suddenly he gave a roaring laugh. "Euh, sly one—I see it now! Simply you were tired of carrying!" Springing to his feet, he grabbed up his pack and threw it in the river. "There!" when it had sunk. "I am as free to make haste as you are!"

"You're one for the book, Paul——"

"Not for your notebook, I hope." His big shoulders were still jumping with the excess of his mirth as he picked up the Mauser, lying where he had dropped it when he had begun on the vines. It was so fouled with wet clay that it looked like a mud-strewn stick. He rubbed it futilely on his pants, still chuckling. "What a pair! With not even a bit of brass to show, of all that equipment we bring back two weapons—only one of which now will fire!" Then he began to unfasten his revolver belt. "This one you had best take, Shep——"

"No!"

Savery looked at him in startled surprise. "But small arms were never my forte. I thought that perhaps——"

"Keep it." He took the useless rifle, saying less forcibly, "I need a crutch. If there's any shooting to be done, you can do it."

Two hours later they came onto a woodcutter's road and followed it until it joined a wider avenue. Presently a bullock cart approached. As it creaked by the driver, turbaned in Tonkinese fashion, eyed them in fearful curiosity—two dirty, bearded white men out here where snipers had made it unsafe for years, making sounds which must be some variety of song.

They passed a bivouac of colonial troops, vain and bored among the trees. Their presence further heightened Savery's spirits, and when the yellow robe of a stray bonze appeared on the rutted brown aisle he gave a whoop. "I never thought I would be glad to see another priest!" as he dropped a coin into the outstretched begging bowl. "We will be in time for a grand dinner, no fear!"

Well before dusk Siem Reap tossed its dirty outskirts at them. A few minutes later they trudged down its main street, their

noses rebelling against the smell of civilization, to the one small European inn.

A delighted clerk greeted them with a firecracker display of courtesy. So the tourists actually were venturing back to Angkor! He gave them a drink in a dusty bar with a baize-ripped pool table, and sent his boy racing to secure a taxi for the short trip over to the Grand Hotel.

It was a ramshackle vehicle, held together with oaths and baling wire, but it reached the handsome establishment near the ruins without dissolution—and with its passengers delivered even managed proudly to racket off down the freshly swept drive.

The two men paused on the steps, looking up at the façade of safety like tramps hesitating outside a residence where the demands of ordered living obtain. They were silent—though whether from relief, regret, anxiety, or simple fatigue neither precisely knew. The one prevailing impression of both was that here, in the presence of a roof that meant a resumption of their usual habits, the dangers and novelties of the past days finally were done. Something else past . . .

"Well, old Shep," Savery began; but then Alix came running out the entrance. "Chériel!" he cried, stretching out his arms. He held them there, rigid, when she went past him to kiss Shepherd full on the mouth.

XXIII

IN THE MEMOIRS of Tcheou Ta-kouan, a Chinese traveler who visited Angkor in 1296, there is a description of the royal city:

"The outer wall is about eight miles in circumference. It has five main gateways, each flanked by oriented side gates. Outside the wall there is a big moat—outside the moat, causeways with big stone bridges. The piers of the bridges are of enormous size and have buddhas painted on them. On either side of the

bridges there are fifty-four stone genii like stone generals, huge and terrible. The parapets of the bridges are of stone, carved in the shape of nine-headed snakes. On the gates of the wall are five stone heads of buddha. On both sides of the gates are carved stone elephants. The inner side of the rampart forms a ramp at the top of which are large gates, closed at night, opened in the morning. There are guardians at the gates, dogs and criminals who have had their big toes cut off being forbidden to enter. The wall forms a regular square, at the corners of which stand four stone towers. Marking the center is a tower of gold, flanked by more than twenty stone towers and several hundred stone cells. On the east side there are a gold bridge with two gold lions on each side, and eight gold buddhas, standing at the foot of the stone chambers.

"All, from the King downward, men and women alike, wear the topknot, and have their shoulders bare. They simply wrap a piece of cloth around their loins. The King alone may dress in flowery garments. He wears a gold diadem. When he has no diadem, he wreathes his topknot in garlands of highly scented flowers of the jasmine variety. About his neck he wears close to three pounds of large pearls. His wrists, ankles, and fingers are covered with cat's-eyes. He goes barefooted and the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands are dyed red. When he appears in public he holds in his hand a sword of gold. The higher dignitaries use palanquins with gold shafts and four parasols with gold handles.

"The King has five wives, one who occupies the private apartments officially, and one for each of the four points of the compass. As regards concubines and women attached to the palace I have been told they number between three and five thousand divided in different classes. Every family where one of the daughters is handsome brings her to the palace as a matter of course. Every few days the women go to bathe in the river outside the city. Thousands of them may be seen at one time, from head to foot. Even women of the nobility enjoy doing this and do not feel ashamed. Men, when they are not busy, frequently amuse themselves by watching this spectacle.

"When the King goes out, cavalry heads the escort; then come the standards, the pennants, and the band. Maidens of the palace, to the number of three to five hundred, dressed in flowery gowns, with blossoms in their hair and holding large tapers in their hands, form a troop. Even by daylight their tapers are lighted. Then come other maidens carrying the royal utensils of gold and silver and a whole set of ornaments of widely different patterns. Next come maidens of the palace carrying lances and shields. They are the King's bodyguard and likewise form a troop. After these come the carriages drawn by goats, and those drawn by horses, one and all ornamented with gold. The ministers, the princes, ride in front on elephants and look far ahead. Their red parasols are not to be numbered. After them come the King's wives and concubines, in palanquins, in carriages, or on elephants. They carry more than a hundred parasols adorned with gold. Behind them is the King, standing upright on an elephant and holding in his hand the precious sword. The elephant's tusks are cased with gold. Numerous elephants crowd round him and he is further protected by cavalry."

Yet not sufficiently protected, a soul-shaken French naturalist was to find, pushing his way across a pestilent sea floor of jungle and coming upon what no other white man had ever beheld, the ruins of Angkor Thom, the Great Capital, and a mile outside its split walls, Angkor Wat, the Temple of the Capital. "Picture to yourself," Henri Mouhot was to write later, "the finest productions, perhaps, of the architecture of all ages dumped down in the depths of these forests, in one of the remotest countries of the world, a wild, unknown, deserted tract, where the tracks of wild beasts have blotted out those of man and the silence is broken only by the roaring of the tiger, the harsh trumpeting of the elephant and the call of the stag to its mate. Only the stones remain, but how eloquent their language!"

In 1908, nearly fifty years after Mouhot's epochal discovery, the government of Indo-China placed its restoration in care of the Archaeological Service of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient. A few decades later, the work well along, a hotel was established between Angkor and the village of Siem Reap.

It is a most comfortable, excellently appointed hotel, with balconies from which guests may look out over an intervening cleared space to where carved faces wear the same indulgent smile with which they once regarded the pomp of Yaçovarmān, called the King of Glory.

From his, Shepherd surveyed their distant promise, anxious to visit them, yet nervous and anticipatory about his own history here in this art nouveau edifice. He felt ready. Somewhat constrainedly he had left the Saverys soon after the previous evening's arrival. A bath, shave, dinner in bed, and the house doctor saying that his wound looked fine, followed by ten hours of dreamless sleep had brought him a sense of physical renewal. His bags had been brought up from Pnom-Penh, but there had been no message forwarded from Lem. Why, he could not conclude—and he went down to the desk for another inquiry. But there was no further news.

His question on the possibility of putting through a call to Saigon irritated the directeur. With a polite managerial smile he declared that telephone service would be established soon, wondering what would be requested next. Three hundred miles of connection! Had not this American idiot been told that a cordon of soldiers was deemed necessary around the whole area, a belt of protection for this ill-advised opening?

Frowning, Shepherd went out on the terrace, where breakfast was being served. As he was finishing his coffee Alix appeared. Fresh and composed, she greeted him with no indication of the excitement which had marked her welcome the night before. Paul, she said, was still in his room, and asked with a subdued smile, "Do you think he might have read Rostand: 'A kiss is an oath of allegiance taken in close proximity, a promise more precise, a seal on a confession, a rose-red dot upon the *i* in living'?"

"There was a rumpus?"

"To a degree," she admitted; "until I explained that I was so happy the trip was safely over that my eyes blurred and I did not see whom it was I first seized."

"Did he believe you?"

"And why not? Don't you?"

"Should I?"

"Paul thinks of me as impulsive," was her answer. "He is so competent that the actions of others often seem so to him, and puzzle his judgments."

"With you around, that I can understand!"

She was silent until a waiter came for her order. When he had gone she said, "So he operated on you, and later pulled you from quicksands?"

"I guess it wouldn't be stretching things to say that he saved my life twice," he replied shortly, infuriated that Savery so promptly had told her of his misfortunes. "But he must have pointed that out, in his modest way."

"Do not be cross. You saved his once, as well."

"So he's still one up, isn't he?"

She put out a hand, smoothly and quickly. "There is no need to lose your temper. Accidents happen."

"But none happened to him, is that what you're trying to say?" As the lids went down over her eyes he went on hotly with "Well, isn't it? I muffed it, yes! And those guns have arrived—that's all you care about. That's so too, isn't it?"

"I do not know," she said with an effort, her eyes still closed. "There was nothing to say so among the papers I brought up here. Paul appeared vexed."

"But you smoothed down his feelings about that too, I suppose."

Her eyes flared open. "Oh! Have you no—no sense of things quite at all? How can you say those things to me? That—and of my caring for nothing but the shipment? You must know that it is not so! You must!"

He stared at the tip of his cigarette, quite without words, and with so much to say. Of himself as whilom friend and would-be murderer. Of her, possibly the woman of his fondest hope, against whom the cold monitor that guarded his mind even now was shouting.

"Here comes Paul," he heard her say. "The bar at four——"

He did not raise his glance until Savery's voice was gentle above the table. "Another tête-à-tête?"

"It was about you," Shepherd said as he sat down.

"Yes," from Alix quickly; "we were wondering if you intended to sleep all day."

Savery's gaze was shuttling between them with the alertness they had shown at the tea dance. "Ah yes," as it came to rest on Alix, "I had a fine rest." He turned to Shepherd. "And you, old *éclaireur*?"

"Why not?" He stood, and when Savery asked him where he was going indicated the great park behind the hotel. "Over to see if I can find an undiscovered temple full of gold and precious gems—of ivory, apes, and peacocks, and casks of sweet white wine."

"If you do, recall that we are partners! This Shepherd is an incorrigible romantic," he told Alix, picking up a menu. "One day you must hear him tell of his fancies. In truth, some of them are quite fascinating when he gets going."

"I shall look forward to it," she murmured, meeting his eyes with her grave smile.

Savery's laughter followed him as he went down to the road. A ricksha man came running, but he waved him away and started down the graveled avenue. Replicas began to appear—lions with fierce faces and a humorous lack of tails, the ubiquitous multiheaded Naga, and then the cleared space where Angkor Wat stands in its huge moat.

His breath quickening, he took the wide paved roadway, built to support elephants, and approached the temple's storied majesty. Closer up, he saw that it was encircled by a gallery, inside which three terraces, executed with equal care, rose to support a tower like an enormous lotus bud. He went up a flight of steep steps, passed through a weirdly windowed arcade, and stared at the spired, narrow-roofed mass of the inner temple that hung above like brown, frozen lace.

Incredulous and appalled, his eyes were so charged with its beauty that when he saw movement among the crouching lions, serpents, and dancing girls ornamenting its steps he thought it a trick of heat waves. But when a tortured music began he moved closer and found that he had seen correctly. In full regalia, liv-

ing counterparts of the stone Apsaras were performing before the entrance to the main structure.

They seemed unnoticing of his approach, nor was he given any attention by the corps of cleaners busy working on the central pyramid. He stopped in the shade of a mammoth cobra fan to watch, almost convinced that at any moment they would slip back and join the file of their graven, equally grave, imperishable sisters. Then he saw that he had been observed. A woman was crossing the open avenue of sandstone blocks, her European dress discordant in this monumental sanctuary.

As she came quickly up the weather-beaten stairs he thought: "Poor Bijou—here where she should be the most perfect, she looks the most incongruous of all."

"I thought it was you," she said. "It isn't everyone who walks half like a man, half like a battleship."

"Did I come plowing in like that? I thought I sneaked like a mouse."

"The sneak part I'll grant. The mouse never."

He grinned. "Hello, Bijou."

She shrugged indifferently. "Is everybody in Saigon coming up for this thing?"

"You look younger without all that gook on your face."

"I'm almost thirty. Sleep with me sometime and find out."

"You hold it well. What're you doing here, getting ideas for a new routine?"

"You are so stupid that I don't see—how anybody could get so stupid!" She put out her hand and he gave her his cigarette. "Or perhaps you enjoy insulting me," she muttered, drawing on it sullenly.

"Why should I? You know I like you."

"Well, I don't like you!" with a savage snap. "Oh, I'd like to go to bed with you, all right. Just to hear you beg when you came around again. That's what I'd like!"

"Look, honey, it's a lot too hot to quarrel—particularly about Subject A. Just tell me what you're doing here."

"To dance," she answered, her expression holding. "The hotel engaged me for a specialty tomorrow night. They evidently

didn't believe," sarcastically, "that these local girls—the best group outside the state corps in the whole country—were enough for their distinguished clientele."

"I didn't see you around the hotel."

Her tone became more acid: "And why do you suppose that might be—if it isn't that I'm not good enough to stay there? No, the half-caste must stay over in Siem Reap, where she won't contaminate any of you——"

"Easy."

She threw away the cigarette with an oath. "I hope snipers get through the soldiers and get the whole lot of you! Me too—if it would mean stopping any more of these tries at business as usual."

"It might be a good thing for you if you did get bumped," he told her. "Not only because you're due for a crack-up if you keep this hate going—but just getting shot might be easier than Paul Savery."

"Savery?" she stared at him, the long eyes diminishing. "What about M'sieur Savery? The map . . . ?"

"The map—leading to that secret temple the Ecole Française doesn't know about," he said disgustedly. "Not much they don't! They'd been there years ago. Now tell me the truth, if there's any in you—did you actually believe it would be a find?"

"I had reason to, yes. There must be a lot of untouched ruins out there. Of course I thought there was something to it!" she insisted. "Do you think I deliberately would offend M'sieur Savery?"

"Not unless you thought he might not get back. Did you send word upcountry to be on the lookout for him?"

"What? No! He didn't go and look for it himself!"

"He sure did." Her astonishment appeared so authentic that he added, "I had a notion that you might have sicked some of your friends onto him because of the gun deal."

At the rehearsal the music whined to a halt. Bijou looked over toward it and called out, but the ballet mistress moved her hand negatively and started arranging the coryphees in another pattern. She turned back to Shepherd and said, as though another

part of her mind had not ceased digesting his information, "So—he was the one who took over the shipment! But why—why? What does he want it for?"

"Better save your fretting for the fact that you took him over," curtly. "A silly thing to do, even if you didn't know it was a fraud. He'd have pulled you to pieces like a fly if he'd had his hands on you when we found that rock pile."

"You were with him?" As he nodded, definite alarm showed in her voice. "Then—he is here too?"

When he told her that they had arrived the night before her face became tense, thoughtful. Then she sighed and made a little gesture of resignation. "So you and he got together."

"Don't let that bother you. I didn't tell him you were after those guns. So far as I know, he thinks it was my dicker for them that he screwed up—doesn't even know that you figured in it."

"You didn't tell him?"

"I told you I didn't. Just why, I don't know, unless I was hoping to twist an angle out of you both wanting them."

"That's good at least," she mumbled.

"It isn't much. He won't forgive you just because he stepped on your toes accidentally. You'd better keep out of his way for a while."

She looked up at him as she had done the night in front of her restaurant. "Yes, sometimes you're all right. You won't tell him I'm here?"

"No, but what of it? He'll see you dance. You'd better cancel and go back."

She shook her head. "I can't. I'm contracted for—and if I ran out now they'd see I never worked in Saigon again. But he won't know, if you keep still. I'll be wearing formal make-up tomorrow night, just like all the others. And the hotel people already have asked me not to say I'm here. It's much more colorful"—the word flew from her mouth like a hard chip—"if the audience thinks I'm another Siem Reap native. The car that takes me back leaves early the next morning."

"Good enough, then; and if there's a jam, I'll be around."

Her stubby hands grasped one of his. Turning it, she kissed the inside of his wrist. Then she turned and hastened back to the wailing music and the bright carousel of nymphs so like those dedicated to Vishnu, the Protector.

XXIV

THE ODOR of doom can be as tangible as that of love, and at times of much the same quality. As Shepherd recommenced his tour he found his senses yielding to an oppressive yet sharply exhilarating essence compounded from a consideration of these mildewed rocks and what their modern neighbor might hold, later.

Like all men who pass much time in her company, he was leery of the series of emotions that in woman usually passes for intelligence. Long ago he had joined the baffled body of students which admits that there is no consistent method of stalking the working of her "mind"—because there is no way to determine what she thinks with. Until Alix's action on the hotel steps the evening before he had let himself hope that she might be miraculously different. But despite the assurance of her ordinarily well-measured behavior it now appeared that she was, at bottom, as whimsical as Peggy herself. Nor was he ready to grant her claim that Savery so easily had accepted her explanation for the kiss. True, he had given no contrary indication. His manner had been a trace distant when they had parted last night, but this morning, aside from the quick, almost automatic inspection, it had seemed characteristically affable. Still . . .

Thus he continued on to Angkor Thom, one portion of his brain succumbing to the magnificence of the deserted dwellings, another occupied with the living lock of the one that held him, and his warning mechanism active as a fire bell above both.

Crossing the Giant's Causeway, lined on either side with huge demigods holding the length of a mighty Naga, he passed beneath the towering, four-faced Gate of Victory—and his occupa-

tion with the problems of modernity was swamped by the richness of the Khmers' final treasury against time: the mammoth five-headed horse, emerging from a delicately carved wall; the royal terrace, supported by three hundred yards of full-size elephants, and that of the Leper King, held by four tiers of tiny, numberless figures of kings armed with short swords, surrounded by pearl-bedecked princesses.

At the center of the city he came upon the most original of the sacred buildings, the Bayon. Myriad domes lifted in tiers to seem a single pyramid, with terraces bearing towers from which jutted seven score of seven-foot faces, flanked by galleries with eleven thousand people and animals in a mile of historical bas-relief. Like Mouhot, and Pierre Loti, just fifty years before, he stared at it, marveling at the skill and ingenuity of Yaçovarman's craftsmen, those incomparable artists who had designed such a tribute to "He Who Looks Down with Compassion," scored the prodigious stones, and raised them in lasting memory.

He wandered on through the silent display until mid-afternoon, not hurrying, content to take a small lesson from this deserted shell of a million lives, laved in the benediction of its therapeutic peace. Yet as the ferment in his mind quieted he had again his increasing sense of one more river crossed, another horizon explored—more definitely this time, for when he started back to the hotel he had a disturbing feeling of completion. After this—what would there be to see? With the next immediate days successfully lived might he not, undistracted, hang up his walking shoes and somewhere find a desk?

He was early but Alix was already in the bar, watching the door. She was smoking a cigarette with the awkwardness of little practice, two saucer markers beside a half-consumed vermouth cassis.

"The shipment has arrived——"

"Word's come?"

"By a car from Pnom-Penh."

"Paul told you?"

"No, he's upstairs with his mail now." Looking away, she said, "Before I left I—made arrangements with the mail clerk to steam

open any wires he received and send me copies. A note from him was in my letters."

"How are they handling it?"

She hesitated, then returned her eyes to his. "Paul has a small warehouse with a loading dock at Vinh-long, up one of the mouths of the Mekong," she answered after another pause. "He once used it for hides and kapok, but it has been empty for some time. They will deposit it there from the freighter."

"What else did the wire say?"

"That was all—just that the kapok cargo was ready."

"You're sure that's not what it is?"

"No," as she shook her smooth head. "He sold his export-import last year. I thought that would be the place."

"Do you think he will want to go down right away?"

"Not before he has seen Mr. Eng, at least, who will arrive tomorrow. They have some business about a concession, and he would want that settled. I see no reason why we should leave before the dances tomorrow night. But the next day, surely."

"Probably knowing it's here is enough. He told me that he had no customer for it."

Her eyes flashed around to him, spreading in astonishment. "Paul—confided in you about this?"

"Yes—he wants me to come in with him."

Her lips moved slightly but she did not speak.

He moved his head saying, "It was rather flattering."

"Oh, my darling——"

"It's the same way it was," he said, lights blinking in his head like an electric sign. "But what now? If those cases are landed and sorted, a word to Duphaine and they're out of circulation."

"Something did happen out there."

He turned. Her face was averted, but he could see tight lines etched on the lovely profile. "Why do you say that?"

She raised her hand and pressed its back against her forehead. "Oh, I do not know—I am so confused. This heat. My head spins——"

"Here." Drawing a small vial from his pocket, he shook a tablet into her hand.

For a moment she looked at it, then suddenly put it in her mouth and swallowed. "It's a salt pill," she said, taking a drink of water.

"What did you think?"

She raised unhappy eyes. "Oh, Shep—do not be too severe with me. These last few days—I have come to the place where, I do not know—at times it seems I am losing my mind. Truly," with a drained smile, "if it had been something else, there well could have been no blame. What a thing I have gotten you into!"

"Great God! And I thought you were well balanced."

She sighed. "Yes—until all these pressures began on me. But the fear of those arms in the wrong hands, and the way Paul has been because—because——"

"Then you haven't?"

Her expression was invaded by such resentment that he colored. "I shouldn't have asked that," he told her, "but I'm glad I did. I must admit I hated to think about it."

"Yes," she said quietly, "that is why we must get it settled, and completely. You say inform the authorities—but cannot you know that it is not just this shipment that is the danger? If it is taken, there will be others. It is Paul himself who must be——" Her voice stopped, then added in the same husky monotone, "—eliminated, if peace ever is to come."

Shepherd was remembering Savery on the boat saying, "Why did the old fool not send for me?" and his fierce whisper on the hilltop: "Power—the greatest thing in all the world . . ."

"Yes," he said. "He's one of the big eaters."

"And in addition, how otherwise are we ever to——"

"Yes?"

"I can't—here—like this!" She gripped her hands together, thin knuckles straining whitely against the tan skin. "Oh—if only out in the jungle—something had happened!"

"It didn't work out that way."

"But, Shep—it must! Even here there are so many possibilities! Many! Mon dieu, are we not surrounded with men who hate all that Paul stands for?"

"Yes, it could be done here, as well as anyplace."

"And it will be?" Her hands raised quickly to her eyes. "I try to be strong," she said miserably. "I try to think straight and clear—and then when I try to put forth, the action I ask sounds but like merely another woman who wants to be rid of her husband. And that is true too," she added after a moment. "Too true." Dropping her hands, she turned humbly. "Do I sound so like a fool to you—with all your formidable panache?"

"You sound——"

"Sh-Shep!" cried Peggy's voice.

She bounced across the floor so happily that she almost nullified his surge of annoyance and dismay, and flopped like a spent, exultant runner into a wicker chair. "Hello, Mme. Savery." Her eyes batted at Shepherd in her two-eyed wink. "Well, fancy meeting you here!"

"Likewise," he said grimly.

"Isn't it wonderful! Inspector Duphaine was coming up for the dances and all, and he brought Lem and me in his car."

Beside him he could feel Alix stiffen. "Oh, Duphaine, eh? And Lem? Where are they?"

"There weren't any more servants' rooms here so Duphaine ran him over to the hotel at Siem Reap. He ought to be along in a minute. Did you and Paul have a good trip?"

Alix arose. "If you'll excuse me—my head is getting no better. I am sure that Paul"—she touched the word lightly—"will be happy that you have come, Miss George. Perhaps we all will meet here for cocktails?" When they assented she said, "Until then," with a smile, and her co-ordinated grace carried her out to the lobby.

"Did I break up something, I hope?" Peggy asked. "Glad to see m-me, rascal?"

"Sure, but how come? What about the job and all?"

"Oh," carelessly, "Dracot said of course I should see Angkor. But what I really came about, Shep, was Lem. Honest to gosh, I think he's ready for the l-loony bin." She measured him with a look and said: "He came popping in a f-few days ago s-saying he'd b-booked us on a boat for Shanghai. Then yesterday when

it was sailing wanted me to leave without you—and said that you'd t-told him to."

"I did, Peg." She gave a little gasp, and he went on with, "Things haven't been landing on their feet here. I thought it best that you wait for me there. You should have gone!" he added sharply. "It would have been less complicated."

"Complicated how?" she demanded. "What have you b-been up to?"

"Now don't start asking questions! Isn't it enough that I want you away? Why don't you behave just once? Try it on for size sometime to see what it feels like!"

"But I only w-wanted——"

"You wanted! Don't you ever consider that anybody else might want—ever?"

Suddenly she laughed and, reaching across the table, worked her hand into his. "Holy s-smoke! You sound as if w-we'd been m-married for years! And speaking of that," as she crinkled her face at him, "don't you want to come and s-see my room, she asked d-delicately?"

"Stop clowning, won't you? You say Duphaine——"

"Clowning!" she cried. "Wh-who's cl-cl-cl——" She stopped, staring at him, her eyes, her mouth, and the little holes of her nose stunned circles in the round of her face. Then she stood up and started for the exit, her head down as if she were watching the careful progression of her feet.

"Waiter!" he called, but when the man came he irritably dropped a bill on the table and left. In his room he tore off his jacket and flung it at a chair. He could picture her, lying quietly face down on her bed as she did when she was disturbed, her hands tucked under her, peering at the counterpane against her ridiculous nose.

"Oh goddamn it," he groaned, "to be seventy!" But even as he made that immemorial wish for deliverance he knew that its fulfillment would be the worst state of all. There was only one way to escape—and even then there probably would be girl ghosts too.

He could not sleep, nor would his seething mind yield to the

diversionary tactics of shower, shave, and fresh clothes. He contemplated going over to Siem Reap but concluded that it would not help to hear the details of Lem's failure to get Peggy away. Returning to the bar, he drank a double gimlet. The raw alcohol spread a little welcome numbness through him and he ordered again. As his oppressive uncertainty of procedure diminished he began to move into his approved state of readiness, like a pitcher feeling himself warming up well.

Duphaine came through the doorway, trim and dry-looking, as if there were nothing within his crisp whites to be affected by the last flush of the day's heat, or by what might be of portent in the encroaching evening. He seemed pleased to see Shepherd, in a friendly way, and after some questions about the hunting trip, began to extoll the merits of Georges Simenon.

Shepherd listened attentively—not to one policeman's opinion about the fictional activities of another, but for the oblique information which he had come to expect in Duphaine's small talk. He found none. The engaging inspector apparently was merely filling in his ignorance of Inspector Maigret without outside intent. Nothing, it seemed, had transpired since their last meeting to cause him to be viewed more officially.

Savery's appearance banished the literary flavor from their discourse. He came rolling into the room like a bear with a sore paw and started drinking at once. But the quick, straight whiskies did not soothe the ache that troubled him. He kept darting short glances at Shepherd, opening his mouth and then closing it, as if not knowing what he needed to say.

When Alix joined them, sheathed in a poise as elegant as her gown, he gave her such a look of blank frustration that Shepherd judged what the reason for his unhappiness must be. Greeting Duphaine, she refused an *apéritif* and sat quietly, her attention distributed with felicitous, impartial dignity, impervious to the gaze which her husband began sweeping between her and Shepherd like a spectator at a tennis match.

Shepherd's appreciation of Duphaine was mounting; voluble as a marionette, allowing no lapses, he was holding the table with a smooth flow of inconsequentialities that prevented open

notice of Savery's ugly mood. Then the inspector's eyes, roving for a moment, kindled relievedly. Looking around, Shepherd saw that Duphaine was aware of help for his typical French aptitude in sensing an awkward situation and courteously seeking to cover it.

Peggy was approaching, her superlative superstructure bursting like white fire from a dress defiant of all gravity. She was smiling a little, hesitantly, and he had again a feeling of compassionate tenderness, of wanting to protect her from the opinions behind the stares she was receiving. She was so like a puppy approaching with a wagging tail, a shy biddy arriving at a party, not sure of welcome or that she would be liked . . . Peggy, with all her emphasized attributes of a complete woman, yet maintaining such an air of uncertain innocence. A little girl with the body of a big one.

"Hi, f-folks," she said, and suddenly there was talk and laughter, with Savery's the loudest of all.

His gaiety continued through dinner, with an increasing boisterousness that took no notice of Alix. Peggy, as determined to be oblivious of Shepherd, answered his elaborate attentions with a show of interest. Duphaine was clearly distressed by the calm with which Alix accepted their charade, and sought valiantly to divert her. But though she accepted his conversation pieces and tossed them back politely, it was evident that her thoughts were elsewhere. She gave Shepherd an occasional glance, signifying nothing, but he sensed that she wished to tell him something.

When after the liqueurs Duphaine asked to be excused to write a report—"Ah, chinoiserie de bureau!"—he thought that Paul might see an opportunity to continue his flirtation with Peggy elsewhere, and so allow him to walk Alix on the terrace. But to his astonishment it was Alix who rose, saying, "I'm afraid that I must go along too. A little too much sun today, I am afraid." And then, "Paul, mon cher . . ."

There was no mistaking the gentle invitation in her eyes, and Savery stood slowly with a half frown of disbelief. Then it cleared away and for the first time that evening he addressed Shepherd

directly. "You children must forgive the old married people," with a triumphant smile. "Bon soir . . ."

Shepherd watched them pass along an aisle through the tables, stunned, adding another item to his catalogue on the unpredictableness of feminality. "What's the matter?" he heard Peggy ask.

"Why nothing——" He turned to face her. Her merriment gone, she was regarding him steadily, hostile and distrustful.

"There is s-so!" she burst out. "It's that F-French broad!"

"Peg!"

"It is too! Y-you've gone and f-fallen for her! It's all over your f-face! You w-want her just b-because she's a l-lady!"

"The heat's got you too, has it? What would I do with a lady?"

"What you usually d-do!"

"Me?" he said, startled.

"Yes, you! Just something new, that's all it is—no matter who it is!"

"Will you stop yelling, for Christ sake?"

"And you s-stop swearing at me!"

"I wasn't swearing at you—I was only asking you to stop squealing like a stuck pig."

"So now I'm a pig! I hate you, really and t-truly——"

"All right, all right! Go ahead and hate me—and while you're doing it go on back to Saigon and get a boat for Shanghai and forget all about me!"

"I will!" she cried, and began to cry, wide-mouthed like a child. Jumping up, she started to run across the room through a gantlet of women who inspected her with annoyed contempt, their men in sadness.

Feeling empty in a way he never before had known, Shepherd buried his face in a cognac snifter. Would she go? That would be a normal reaction. But you never knew what they would do; that he had learned the hard way. Sighing, he went into the bar and won five hundred piastres at poker dice from a man who said that he would be King of France if the proper people died.

X X V

THE WIND was rising. It had begun early, cool at first and full of pungent whispers, but with the sun's lift above the solid wedge of green at the end of the park its kindliness was supplanted by the hot, nerve-raising blow of a mistral. As it drove across the ruins it seemed to pick up the worn messages of antiquity, dead yet implacably present, and hurl them like splintered javelins against the hotel.

In Shepherd's room Lem sat on the edge of the bed, his feet drawn together, listening vaguely to the harsh words pouring over his bent, throbbing head. He wished desperately that he had postponed coming over for this reprimand. Later in the day he might have felt more capable of discerning what was wrong with the boss. It was not like him to continue angry about anything to do with Peggy, with them both knowing how difficult she could be.

"Please, Shep," he said finally. "I admit I didn't do the orders. But what could I do?"

Shepherd started to reply, then his face twisted into a black grin. "What could I do?" he repeated. "A fine one I am to answer a question like that!" He gave a disgruntled snort. "Somewhere along the line I got a jacket slipped on me, and it's getting laced tighter all the time."

Lem frowned unhappily. "So many things of which I do not know. Shep, if it could be that you would tell me——"

"Are you wearing a gun? I lost mine."

Turning to face him, Lem reluctantly removed his coat. A flat holster was strapped to his armpit. As he unfastened the harness Shepherd saw a second belt on the thin chest and spun him around. A knife lay neatly between the protruding shoulder blades.

"Whatever you say, Shep," in bitter mimicry.

"I tried, but it was like going out without my pants."

"All right—it's just as well."

Embarrassment fled, the thin face flung up, mouth gaping like a worn buttonhole. "There's something coming up?"

"I should know soon." With the small automatic in place he put on his jacket. "We may have to peel off for Siam. Nose around the garage and see if there's a good car you can grab. Also get a pair of pliers to jam up the others. And don't go sticking anybody while you're looking!"

Lem hesitated. "When will we go?"

"As soon as you've seen about the car get back up here. If we leave, it'll have to be without a check-out. Hurry."

He scuttled out, and in a few minutes Shepherd followed. The lobby hummed with pre-gala bustle. A party was just arriving, its members elated by their temerity in making the junket. People who had arrived earlier greeted them like a relief column to the Alamo. The directeur, volubly reassuring, told the newcomers that he had saved them the best seats for the fete, and hastened off to make the same fervid declaration to another group.

In the middle of the lounge Paul Savery was seated with Mr. Eng—almost, Shepherd thought, as if he were on guard. The Cambodian waved vigorously, and, ticking off another lost opportunity to speak to Alix, he walked negligently over to them.

"Well, Mr. Eng, you made it. Morning, Paul."

Savery merely nodded, but Eng opened a pouch of glad greetings. He so clearly was relieved that Shepherd surmised the conference was going badly. With pressing affability he revealed that he had "Such a good pilot!" and added: "A wartime flier. It is such a pity that my wife is undergoing a disposition which prevented her from accompanying me."

Shepherd asked to have his regrets conveyed. "But she's fortunate in having the opportunity for other visits."

Eng bobbed his head. "Everyone will, from now on. This is but the beginning of other great seasons of tourists, of course. Is not Angkor truly worth the trip, Mr. Shepherd?"

"It's all been most interesting," he said with an easy glance at Savery.

"It is so agreeable for you to say so," Eng exclaimed pleasedly. "May one trust that you will spread the tidings at home?"

Savery spoke: "When do you leave?"

His tone was so blunt that Eng flinched and gave a quick diplomatic smile. Shepherd eyed him without expression.

"Perhaps tomorrow. I'm interested in a shipment of kapok I just heard about."

The thick folds of Savery's lids closed around a steady stare. "I used to deal in kapok," he said softly; "perhaps I can advise you that it is a risky business."

"What isn't? See you later, gentlemen."

Savery stood quickly. "Come join us in an *apéritif*."

"Too early, thanks." Nodding, Shepherd strolled out on the terrace. His heart was light and excited. From Savery's attitude it was apparent that the kindness in Alix's eyes the night before had not lasted much beyond the dining room. Yet beyond the exhilarating discovery there were factors to prey on his joy: Savery had cause for suspicion almost to the point of open antagonism, sprung from the proddings delivered by Alix. The kiss at the door, as she said, might have been impulsive; but there seemed no explanation for her invitation to Paul, followed by a rejection which must be the cause of his present ill temper.

Had they both misunderstood her look? Had she really been unwell, perhaps to the point of fainting? Or had she merely wanted to prevent the man of position from making a fool of himself over Peggy before people who knew him?

He shook his head, scowling. Alix was not one to be assisted to her room like an anemic aunt, and Savery's gusto was familiar to the colony. No, it merely added up to the fact that she wanted to provoke Paul, and both actions had been calculated to that end. It looked very much, he thought grimly, as if she were trying to stir up a rhubarb.

The wind was lessening, as if tired from swinging blocks of heat over to fall upon the hotel. They slid from the roof and crashed down on him, numbing attempts at thought. He considered calling her room. Unwise; Savery might have arranged to have her conversations listened to. Nor was there a chance of

seeing her alone with him posted so obtrusively in the lobby. There was nothing to do, again, but wait until she set the time and place for another talk.

In frustrated fury he assented to a guide's pleas and rode out to the temple of Ta Prohm, where he was told 18 high priests and 2740 ordinary priests had officiated to the chant of 615 choristers—numbers unimpressive to a mind revolving perplexedly around one woman.

When he returned to his room he found Lem with an unpromising report. The hotel was providing shuttle transportation for its guests, and aside from the service truck the only car in the garage was Inspector Duphaine's. Ignition keys were in neither.

"Then I'll just sprout a set of wings and fly——" He stopped, his face lightening. "And could be! There's a plane here with an official from Pnom-Penh named Eng. See if you can locate the pilot—probably in the hotel bar in Siem Reap. Get talking with him, and tell him you're secretary-interpreter to M'sieur Shepherd, an American diplomat friend of Mr. Eng's. That's all—but it may pay off later."

Lem grinned. "Secretary-interpreter—Iran, remember?"

"Yes, but this time don't be so officious. Just pleasant, so he'll like seeing you again. And pay for the drinks. All right——"

"Oh yes, Peggy called. She said that she'd been expecting you to call her."

He thought of her, waiting in that hot room, looking at the telephone, at last putting her pride down and reaching for it—Peggy, about whom there never could be any doubts. . . .

"And this note was shoved under the door."

Grasping it, he barked, "Why didn't you give it to me before?" Excitement began to spin like a propeller around his heart. As Lem ran for the door he ripped it open. A single sheet was covered with labored evidence that Alix spoke English far more fluently than she wrote it:

DARLING,

My head is still bad today. A migraine that I have upon occasion. It promises to be better when the heat is less, however, and present

us the opportunity to confer. If not before, then we shall leave during the dance tonight and meet here in my room.

Faithfully,
ALIX

Faithfully! There it was in solid ink. And from the first what else had she proved to his flagrant skepticism? Her confidences regarding Paul; the disclosure of her agonized hope to thwart him; her revelation as to the whereabouts of the arms . . . And his mean mind had sniffed like a dog at her every simple pragmatic action, seeing nefarious purposes even in a headachy glance. What a contrary alchemist the mind could be for men like him, he thought bitterly—a transmuter of all purity into dross. He hurried to the telephone on the wall, an immense need to tell her—what? That he had distrusted her, that he had coldly analyzed each manifestation of her forthright honesty? Hearing the operator's question, he was starting to replace the tiny receiver when an exclamation from Peggy sputtered from it:

"Shep! What d-do you think! I d-did it!"

"Did what?"

"Winked wi-with one eye!"

"I don't believe it." He smiled regretfully. How fond he felt toward her—and how far away. . . .

"I d-did too! Nothing else to d-do," pointedly. "I've b-been practicing. And just n-now I made it. The inspector s-saw me."

"Is he in your room?"

"No, silly—in the b-bar. Come on d-down. It's time for a su-su-su——"

"Sundowner. All right, soon as I've had a bath." He jabbed the tiny receiver on its hook. So now she was winking at that double-talking cop!

The bar was crowded when he reached it, but he saw her watching for him from a banquette. She was alone—curious, he thought, with the part of her that showed above the table top giving the impression that the rest was naked as well.

"Where's Duphaine?"

"You were so l-long I sent him up to h-hurry you be-before I

lost it. L-look!" She crunched up her face until one eye was partially closed. "See?"

"Wonderful. Now if you only had some clothes on you'd be just like everyone else."

Her face straightened. "Don't you like my dress?"

"Where is it?"

If she could have folded her arms around herself, it seemed, she would have done so. "You never let me feel proud."

"Never say that, Peg! Or if you have to—say good-by right after it!"

She looked at him, and her smooth face flashed into a sudden pattern of upturned lines. "Not m-mel!"

"Oh, honey——"

She laid muffling fingers across his lips. "It's all r-right. I was plain s-silly last n-night. It wouldn't be true—not with anyone with n-no more f-figure than hers. I d-don't mistrust you, really and t-truly——" ♦

"Peg——" he said again.

"Stop gr-groaning like that, sweetheart. It's all w-water over the br-bridge."

"The dam! Water over the dam, for Christ sake!"

"Jack Sh-Sh——"

"Shepherd."

"—if you d-don't stop s-snapping my head off, I'll l-leave you!" Suddenly she slapped her hands to her cheeks in simulated horror. "Oh, what I said!"

"Waiter," he called in despair.

Duphaine came pushing through the clamorous cocktails, a step behind, Mr. Eng's gaze was fixed on Peggy with rapt fascination. She met his compliment with typical good nature, and soon pulled him into helping her persuade the detective to repeat an account of how he had captured a man given to removing the heads of his brides.

As Duphaine talked he thought about her—the solid, honest, Canadian quality of her beneath all her captivating sexuality, thought of her as abstractly as though he were considering how to help a friend who needed to tell a girl that a lovely relation-

ship was over. How could it best be done? With what skillful words could he make the cut that at best would drive a fraction of youth from those laughing blue eyes? How? Oh, God, how to best hurt this kind little creature when his hurting would be so much to her own welfare? How?

"No great reason for praise," Duphaine was finishing his grim synopsis. "Like time, police procedure is of the essence. One is put with one, and, granted patience, two may result."

"Twins?" Peggy asked with an impudent look at Shepherd.

He smiled, but beyond small sallies to indicate that he was not averse to the men's company, did not join in the subsequent badinage. Then camaraderie promised a way of detaching himself, later; and when most of the patrons had filtered out to the *salle à manger*, he made his move:

"Why don't you people go on out and have dinner? I'm going to skip it." Peggy looked at him quickly, but when he said, "Go ahead, honey," she rose. ●

"You will join us for coffee, perhaps?" Mr. Eng wanted to know.

"I'll try, but there's a few notes I want to put down about Ta Prohm. If I miss you, I'll catch up with you later."

Peggy tried to say something. Failing, she flushed, substituted a helpless laugh, and led them away without a backward glance. She knows, he thought dully. She had made a good try at covering her anxiety with the business about the wink, and at keeping their meeting customarily light; but she was not actress enough to dissemble perfectly. She knew.

Going out to the lobby, he called his room on the house phone. There was no answer. Lem was either still hunting the pilot or, having found him, was busy opening an exit for their getaway. The bus and rickshas started to shuttle between the hotel and Angkor Wat with fares to the dances. Screened by a potted palm, he saw Peggy leave with Duphaine and Eng, after a look in the bar for him. He waited another half hour without sight of the Saverys. Calling Alix's room again seemed inadvisable, and on the chance that they might already have left unseen, he called a ricksha.

The wind had died. Pitch torches flared along the road to the temple, weaving like lanterns in the humid night. The linking causeway had been similarly illuminated, as well as the steps and courtyard of the alfresco stage beneath its precipitous stone backdrop. A minor threnody of pipes and xylophones, underscored with the weighty tapping of drums, languidly met his approach across the wide walk. The dark outlines of spectators blocked his first view of the dancers, but, entering a gallery, he found a window that gave him a panorama view of both dancers and audience.

Their spired mokots and gold-cloth costumes assisted by the flickering flambeaux, the girls now seemed even more part of the stone decorations from which they might have stepped. Their slender arms and delicate fingers moved with the deliberation of figures under water, spelling out their people's history in an alphabet of entranced, passionless shifts. Then in a gradual diminishment of music and movement Bijou swept from a dark doorway.

She had been right, he saw, in being confident that her chalky mask and scarlet mouth would be an effective disguise. More elaborately dressed than the others, her accents faster and more sharply defined, she immediately exercised a star performer's magic and gathered all attention. Yet despite her expert showmanship she did not stress individuality to the point of disconcerting the ballet's completeness. She was its focus, but she remained a part of the whole, tasteful and artistically anonymous.

Leaving her smoothly articulated display, Shepherd's eyes worked over the silent watchers—the almost phosphorescent faces of the Europeans and those of darker blood serried before the shave-headed bonzes in the rear. Peggy, enraptured, was in a front row of chairs with Duphaine and Eng, but he could not locate the Saverys.

Dropping farther back into the shadows, he went down the steps to the stone walk and returned to the hotel. As he entered the lounge from the door giving on the park, Paul Savery stood up from a divan.

"The divertisement was a bore?"

"At least I gave them a look. What about you and Alix?"

"I find them unamusing, and my wife is confined to her room."

"Oh—I'm sorry. Nothing serious?"

Savery frowned. "I am not quite sure. She has taken a sedative and is sleeping soundly. It may put her right." He started abruptly for the bar, holding a weave carefully from his gait. "Let us have something."

The small room was empty save for a service team. Savery chose a wall seat, and they ordered. Belching absently, he did not speak again until he had received his drink. Then he raised the glass.

"To us—companions of la chasse."

"What's on your mind, Paul?" as he lifted his in reply.

"Always one for the clarifications, eh? Yes, and in truth, that is one of the many things I have liked about you. It makes for such simplicity." Taking a pad of thousand-piastre notes from his pocket, he slid them along the table. "There—that is equally simple."

"How so?"

"Take them," brusquely. "It is as much as you would have made on our little deal, had we engineered it as I promised. However, I now am not sure that there may be a market. Eng tells me that resistance is being eliminated with great rapidity."

"Mr. Eng is a professional optimist."

"Perhaps," dismissingly. "But even if I proceeded, it would require much time. And I am sure that you are anxious to resume your travels. Take it, Shep."

"Why?"

"Because I make no promises I do not keep! Now put it in your pocket and we will drink, and then part with you remembering me as one who keeps his word. There is enough there for anything you might wish," as Shepherd still made no move toward the money. "Anywhere in the world."

Shepherd looked at the crisp packet on the polished wood. Anything, anyplace, with Tuey Fung paid and the jewelry returned. The cure-all. The passport to a better tomorrow . . .

But also the bought-off elimination of Alix from a future that would be as dead as ashes without her.

"Yes, it can mean as much to you," Savery continued in a deep, labored voice, "as much as it is little to me—beside the prospect of a true loss."

He turned. Savery's great head was down on his chest, like that of a broken stag surrounded by wolves.

"For you see, Shep," the deep voice rumbled on, "I fear that Alix has become affected by you. Oh, for no untoward action on your part, old friend—save the fact of your personal self. But that is enough, I dare say, to influence even a woman like Alix to a moment of foolishness." He wet his heavy lips, struggling on. "Bear with me when I say that it would not be an answer for me to kill you, and thereby perhaps create an irrevocable resentment in Alix. No, you must help, Shep—by leaving at once. Is it so much to ask," in a tone of forlorn, miserable admission, "when there can be so many for you, only one for me?"

Shepherd felt it coming over him again—the ingrained, ornery trait of fair play that had made him drop his rifle when Savery had cast aside his before their fight; the inability to shoot a man in the back who had pulled him from quicksands—the betraying snare of good impulse . . .

"I plead with you——" The heavy voice lurched and stopped as though its owner had run into an irrefutable wall; then it said, "I must be getting old," in fatigued surprise. "I never said such a thing before, in all truth."

"I'll go——"

"Indeed I must be getting old," Savery said again, as if he had not heard. "To ask such a man as you to depart from me also is not like me. But"—he spread his hands resignedly—"what is even a great companion beside the woman one loves?"

"I said I'd go! Do I have to listen to such drool too?" Picking up the notes, he took a preparatory breath for removing the final barrier to his way out. "You'll get part of this back, in a way. I've some of Alix's jewelry in a pawnshop in Cholon."

Savery's body hardened as though it had been electrocuted. "Comment?"

"She really must be careless not to know it was gone. Either that or she was afraid to tell you. I took it from her bedroom the night I was at your house."

"You sit there," incredulously, "and tell me that you—a guest in my house—robbed me?"

"Not you—Alix," as he unbuttoned his jacket.

Savery reared from his seat, his hands balled into fists, knocking over a chair. "What kind of a fool is this you make of me? Steal from beneath my very nose! Get out!" he yelled. "Out of Saigon on the next boat—or I will have you in jail!"

Moving to his feet, Shepherd said, "You'll have who where, Pasquale Paoli Allorge, dealer in kapok?"

Blood surged so violently into Savery's face that it seemed near bursting through the restraining skin. He gulped, as if to drink it back. When he spoke his voice was controlled, but it was as if he still were shouting:

"Go," he said. "Go before I change my mind."

"You egotistical ape!" Rage was combing through him so violently that the blocky figure opposite was jerking as though pulled by strings. His hand shook with need toward the shoulder holster. "You and your French attitudes! Soft talk when I might be taking your wife—cries to heaven about a handful of junk!"

Savery returned his glare like a man in a trance; and then, as abruptly as it had risen, the anger fell down within him. Nodding, he dropped back on the banquette. "There is truth in what you say," in an almost inaudible mutter. "It is just that I disapprove of being made the fool."

"The fool is happy that he knows no more," Shepherd snarled, and, tossing the money back on the table, strode past the barmen, fixed and staring like people in a snapshot. He took the lobby stairs to his floor, simmering with a sense of mishandling. The noble gesture! Quoting Pope! Returning the bribe! No doubt—a hero for Queen Victoria!

Outside his room he paused, key in hand, then continued down the corridor to Alix's door. No light showed beyond it. He knocked lightly, and when there was no reply, more loudly.

"Alix?"

"Shep?" he heard her say. "One moment——"

The bolt turned. Curtains drawn from an unclouded moon revealed her before a rumpled bed. Her face was white with strain, the hand that held her peignoir sharp against the pale cloth. Without speaking she stepped aside for him to enter, and closed the door.

"How do you feel?"

"Not well." She brushed a hand across her eyes. "I thought I might improve, or I should not have sent the note. Have you seen Paul?"

"Yes."

"He went to the festivities? He was here earlier, after his conference with Mr. Eng. I told him that I intended to take a sleeping potion."

"He told me. He also said he thinks you might be getting to like me too much. Did you tell him that too?"

"Shep—what is it?"

"We just had a set-to 'down in the bar."

"He is there now?" quickly.

"Yes. What do you suppose he'd think if he were to find me here?"

"Your voice—you sound so odd. Come here." Drawing him to the fuller light by the window, she gave a checked exclamation. "What has happened?"

"He wanted to pay me to pull out. Why's he got so suspicious, Alix? What did you say to him?"

"Dear—I implore you, do not be this way! My head—it is so confused with pain I cannot think——"

"It's time you started!" He grasped her arms. Heat came to him through the thin silk, and her breath was fevered.

"Shep—darling——"

His hold loosened. "Has that impulsiveness of yours been busy again? He's wise. And tortured. Is that what you wanted?"

"Why?" she whispered. "Why do you think as you do—always these accusations?"

"Because they keep adding up—until Paul and I had a showdown. No, not with weapons," as he felt her tighten. "Words.

A few simple words—that got me in the clear about your jewelry.”

“You told him?” again faintly.

“Yes. I said I’d stolen it from your house. His pride took it hard—but I’m out, Alix.”

“I do not follow. Was not everything—understood?”

He shook her like a limp doll. “By whom? What kind of a start would that have given us? And for what? A few lousy pop-guns! Are they worth having Paul between us every minute of every day and night?”

“You never intended to help,” she said more loudly.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I honestly don’t know. Shaped up right, I guess I might have. Murder’s just about all I haven’t done—but now it’ll still be off my books. I’m going, as I told him I would.” She gave a sobbing gasp, and for a time he stood looking at her. Then he said, “But I didn’t promise that you wouldn’t follow.”

“Oh, Shep . . . !”

“Take some time. Think about it. If it’s me and not just a man who’s mixed up in your mind with a yen to do something for your country—if it’s me, and really not Paul—I’ll be at the Cathay Hotel in Shanghai.”

“I can’t think—I can’t think . . .” Her hands fumbled up to his face and pulled it down.

XXVI

PEGGY came into the bar and crossed to her goal without swerving her gaze from its polished wood, bottles, and shining glassware. At the counter she got immediately onto a stool. “Yes,” she said to the bartender’s greeting.

“Mam’selle?”

“Oh, anything. No—gin fizz.” That was what she had been drinking when they started; let it be the period here at the end.

She steadied herself with her fists against the edge of the wood. Her eyes burned, her back was stiff and tired from waiting for sleep to shut out the awful knowledge that had supplanted her fears. First there had been the look on his face, watching the tall figure sway across her living room; his restraint on the telephone when she had called him in Pnom-Penh; Lem's urgency, so strange at the time, to get her to leave for Shanghai. Even then she had not been overly exercised, Shep's ways being so inexplicable. But there had been nothing with which to compare his attitude when she had arrived here, no certitude, until his flabbergasted expression in the dining salon, when Alix had asked Paul to take her upstairs.

With chagrin she recalled how gay she had tried to be yesterday, still seeking to fight it off but realizing that it was so—until finally, after his non-appearance at the dances, she had gone to his room and found only Lem.

She was conscious of excitement and quick, excited groups forming and dissolving in the lobby outside, muffled protests from the desk. She hoped that Duphaine soon would appear for their departure too. She had been packed for hours.

When a houseboy came to ask her to accompany him to the directeur's office surprise forced itself through her leadened channels of feeling. She hadn't taken even a hand towel! More likely, she thought, following the boy's quiet sandals across the tiles, they wanted to engage her. A fine chance! A fine chance of her delaying five minutes in getting back to Manitoba!

As the door opened to admit her, there was an involuntary jump in her chest. The manager was sitting at his desk like a man who wanted to hold his head in his hands. Inspector Duphaine stood smoking a cigarette before reed chairs that held Shep, Mr. Eng, and, a hand resting across her eyes—Alix Savery.

"Please sit down, Miss George."

"What's the m-matter?"

"Paul's been killed," Shepherd told her quietly.

She sank onto a bench. "P-P-Paul?"

"Sometime last night," Duphaine said. "Now that we all are here," he went on generally, "I must explain that this is merely

in the nature of an informal inquiry called as a courtesy to you, from our acquaintance. Military justice is for the time still in operation here, and to expedite your return to Saigon I will put a few routine questions that customarily would be asked by the local police judiciaire. Mr. Eng——”

The Cambodian returned his gaze with alert composure. “Inspector?”

“Do you have an idea as to why this tragedy might have occurred?”

“None.”

“When was the last time you saw the deceased?”

“Toward evening, last. M’sieur Savery and I were in a business discussion most of the afternoon. Following, I repaired to my room to make my toilet. This accomplished, I had cocktails with you and Miss George——”

“Yes,” with a half-impatient nod. “And after returning to the hotel from the dances we had a nightcap, and you ascended to the room which, due to the crowded condition of the hotel, you and I share.”

“Fortunately, it now would seem.”

Duphaine turned to Peggy. “After we parted last evening, Miss George, did you see M’sieur Savery?”

“N-no. I didn’t see him all d-day.”

“Thank you. Mr. Shepherd—will you be so kind as to relate your whereabouts of last night?”

Alix lowered her hand. “He was with me.”

There was silence. Then Duphaine said to the others, “I believe that will be all for the present. While thanking you for your co-operation, I must make the usual cautions as to being available for the proper authorities. It is my suggestion that you all leave for Saigon as soon as possible. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.”

Alix stood, her eyes set upon the door, and went swiftly out. Pulling herself to her feet, Peggy followed, her head bent as though it was she who had been shamed. As Eng turned to speak to the manager, Duphaine said, “Mr. Shepherd, there is space for you in my car. Under the circumstances——”

"Thanks, I'll be ready when you are." Going to the lobby, he mounted the stairs. In his room Lem looked up from pressing a suit with his small hand iron.

"You can forget about that plane."

"Shep! What is it? What did the directeur want?"

"It was Duphaine—holding a preliminary. Paul Savery's been bumped."

The little man tensed, then exclaimed, "Was it him who you were so worried about?"

"Part of it, yes. Anyway, at least now we needn't duck."

"But, Shep—you're sure?"

"Of course. Fix my bags, then go get yours. Duphaine's giving us a lift back."

"You're sure?" he asked again, more slowly. "If this was the man you were afraid of, it—couldn't be a take-in, could it? You don't think we still should make a run?"

"From what? I didn't do it."

Lem unhooked the iron. "Whatever you say—"

"Then do as I say!" Slamming the door, he hastened down the hall to Alix's room.

She was sitting by the window, gazing out over the midmorning golden wash over the park. She did not turn.

"Are you all right, Alix?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Duphaine wants me to go back with him."

"I suppose that would be best."

"Alix—" Dropping beside her, he took one of the slender hands curled strengthlessly in her lap. "You needn't have told them. My valet was in my room all night."

Her eyes swung around to him uncomprehendingly, the even brows drawing together above them. "Your . . . ?"

"Never mind. Actually it was much better for you to speak for me."

"Then I didn't—quite all to no purpose?"

"Definitely not, darling. I'd have saved you from it if I could, but now that it's done, when we get to Saigon you must say that it was all night I was here, not just a part."

"Yes."

"If only I'd known what the manager wanted to see me about," he burst out, "I could have told you before I went down not to——"

She moved her head a trifle. "Why should I be spared, if it will make it easier for you? Is your man trustworthy?" she asked after a moment.

"Completely. He'll say I didn't come in until this morning."

"Oh, Shep!" She flung her hands up to her face. "May I have the strength for these next few days!"

"You will—you will."

"And—after?" she said through her fingers. "What you said about Paul being between us—tell me that you do not believe that to be true!"

"He won't now, darling—not with everything having worked out this way for us."

"But your words keep haunting me," she whispered. "No, I fear that just because it seems to have been safely accomplished does not mean—oh, Shep, I do so fear—phantoms."

Taking her hands, he pulled them away from her face and tilted it up to him. "Do you think I did it, Alix?"

"Shep, please——"

"But I didn't! I knew no more about it than you did until just now!"

Rising, she kissed his cheek. "Yes—that is the way we must think of it."

"But I tell you—no! I went right to my room, after leaving you. Who it was—a woman named Bijou, Mr. Eng—I don't know. I only know it wasn't I! Didn't I tell you last night that it wouldn't be?" he asked exasperatedly.

"Yes, my darling."

He took a deep breath, struggling for self-possession, and said levelly, "I know it's hard to believe in such miracles, but they do happen. And that's just what we've been given—an honest-to-God visitation! Don't you see? All problems settled—all of them! It will be a bad time, for a while; but as soon as we tell

about the arms they'll make it easier. Perhaps not even hold a formal inquest—just start digging without even calling us."

Turning from the window, she asked, "Did you believe Paul to be a very rich man, Shep?"

"I had supposed so. Why?"

She frowned slightly at his tone, but said as quietly, "He was not. Not so nearly as his impression would give. The money spent for those guns cut vitally into his capital."

"That's all right too. Rich women make me nervous."

"But I must be a rich woman, Shep. I have lived too long in that way to change."

"So?"

"I will have little money, you none." She put her hands together, then separated them as though in a small obeisance to fate. "Thus we must cast aside all other considerations—to think of ourselves."

He was thinking of them, if not in the way she wished. Rather, he was recalling every occasion on which he had suspected her, and of each time that she had sponged the canker, justifying her every action so readily and trustworthily. . . .

"Go on," he said dully.

"Oh, my darling—if only you knew how I have earned one small portion of happiness! And it cannot come without means, I know." She took a breath and said steadily, "That is why we must not tell of that shipment to any but those who might buy it. Shep—I cannot do without money—simply cannot!"

Although with perfect foreknowledge he had known what she was going to say, the exactitude of his certainty was only made more terrible by hearing it given words. His voice came trailing back to him like an echo: "Those soldiers you were so concerned about, your compatriots——"

"But does not everyone say that the fighting soon will be over?" she asked quickly. "It can be that those cases may never even be unpacked. Let us think of it in such a way, shall we?"

"Then that was a lie too. Just like your fear of Paul, and wanting him to be out of business—so that you could take over. All of it, so that you could have money of your own."

"Yes," she said quietly. "Everything grew from that. But with this once admitted," she went on in a more urgent tone, "I also can tell you——"

It was as if he were falling through space, with only her blanched face spinning against the darkness of his closed eyelids. "The fascist's mate—the dead-hearted philistine bitch——"

He felt her come close, so close that he could smell the perfume stirred by the quick rise and fall of the bosom pressed against him. "But you still want me," she whispered, "just as you have always wanted me!"

He struck at her blindly. The slap rang like a breaking stick in the hushed room. Opening his eyes, he saw her thrown back across the bed, staring at him in such hopeless misery that his gaze fell away. With a moan of self-disgust he wrenched open the door and went down the hall to his room, staggering a little on flimsy legs.

He could feel the tingle still in his hand as he turned the knob of his door. Duphaine, in an armchair watching Lem fold clothing into a suitcase, stood politely.

"Forgive this intrusion, Mr. Shepherd. I came to ask if it is convenient for you to leave within the hour."

"Yes—of course."

"Are you not well?"

"We'll be down in a few minutes. Is there anything else?"

Prodding out his cigarette, the detective gave a weary nod. "One and one again, I am afraid. Following Mme. Savery's most astonishing admission, I now find"—he indicated the two used twin beds—"that you were here last night."

"Part of it, yes."

"Your man, doubtless to protect you, says that you were here all of it."

"He was asleep when I came in."

"A proof of the time can wait; the main point is that you were not continually in Mme. Savery's room. Too, I have learned of your quarrel of last evening with the deceased."

"Yes—there was some anger. But you told me before your hearing that Paul was tied up and his feet turned until his heart

stopped. Does that sound like a crime passionnel, or whatever the hell you call it?"

"I also have learned from Eng that your hunting trip with M'sieur Savery was one for treasure."

"We didn't find it."

"Nothing that, for instance, only M'sieur Savery with his vast knowledge of woodcraft could make his way back to? Aided by the map discovered among the linen he had sent to be laundered?"

"If it was that valuable would he be so careless?"

"A tired but unsuspecting man might be so, yes."

"Imagination is a great help in running up a case, isn't it, Inspector?"

Duphaine flinched slightly. "There is no need for unpleasantness between us. Indeed, these are all points for discussion with le procureur—who I fear may find in Mme. Savery's confession not an alibi for you but a motive." He gave an apologetic shrug. "However, as one so familiar with my vocation, you know well that mine is but the assembly of facts, not their prosecution. And with this understood, I would hold that you beyond most men might appreciate where my duty lies."

His anger flared, clearing away his weariness. "I see nothing of the kind! I'm really amazed," as the inspector's cheeks stained. "I've a perfect alibi—yet you'd take me down and book me, cause me to be put through the humiliation and expense of an investigation that might string out for weeks!"

"Chinoiseries de bureau," Duphaine said with a sympathetic sigh. "Yes——"

"I'll say yes! Red tape's nothing new to an old China hand—and I also know what happens to unjust officials! Inconvenience me and I'll pull my consulate down on you like a load of bricks!"

"And you," slowly, "are under the impression that your flag flies so easily?"

Shepherd glared. "This is a fall for the money, Inspector. I'm promising nothing that can't be backed up—solidly. If you think my country, far away as it is, will let you——"

"Mr. Shepherd, rather than this tirade should not one face a few facts?"

"You aren't at all certain that I can command help, are you?"

"Well, are you?"

"No," wryly, "I guess it's all up to me." His fist came up at the right place, and though checked at the last instant by shame for the sneak punch, the detective went down like a dead man. He saw that it was a good blow—solid, effective, yet breaking nothing.

"Get Peggy," to Lem. "Look first in her room. And bring her any way you need to!"

Lem nodded and was gone. Jerking the sheets from the bed, he ripped them into bindings and tied Duphaine's legs and arms, after taking his key ring and credentials. As he was stuffing a handkerchief into the detective's limp mouth the teeth slipped. Removing them, he completed the gag and fastened it in place. He then carried the thin body into the bathroom, where he placed it in the tub. The grinning plate he flushed down the toilet. When he came into the bedroom Lem was following Peggy through the hall door.

"I've got Duphaine tied up in there, Peg. He's out for a while," he told her amazed look. "When he comes to he may make some fuss. If anybody asks about it, put them off. If he gets too nosy hit him over the head with something. It's vital I get a good head start on him."

"Where are you g-going?"

"Never mind; he might get it out of you. Just keep him doggo for as long as you can. When you let him loose you can square yourself by telling him there's a shipment of smuggled weapons and ammunition in Paul Savery's warehouse at Vinh-long. Got it?"

"S-some of it. But what're you d-doing it f-for?"

"He wants to hold me for the Savery thing, and he's sort of a friend. So what'll the rest of them do? You've got to hold him, baby." He saw her face become stormy with the approach of tears and said quickly, "Don't worry, I've gotten out of worse ones than this."

"What d-do you think I am—a sl-sl-slot machine?" She was crying now, her mouth stretched wide for a torrent of whimpering words. "After what she t-told and everything—and then when

y-you need help you think all y-you have to d-do is put a kiss in me, and out c-comes anything you want m-me to d-do——”

“Peg, listen——”

With a defiant wrench she pulled away, avoiding his outstretched hands, falling down on the bed. “Oh, g-go ahead. I’ll h-hold him——”

Bending over, he touched her bright hair. “It’s you, Peg,” as she drew her arms beneath her and pushed her face deeper in the mattress. “It always was, I guess. It always will be, I know now. . . . Come on, Lem,” he said, and started for the door as if fleeing from more than the Sûreté.

XXVII

THERE WAS no attendant in the garage. Duphaine’s car, an old Renault; stood alone on the otherwise empty floor. It appeared that all hands had gone to attend the departure of the bus which, with Duphaine’s directive raised, was ready to begin a trip back to Saigon. It had been standing in front of the hotel waiting for the passengers through which they had casually passed in the lobby.

Lem said with an air of immense enjoyment, “This far the gods are with us.”

Shepherd frowned. Paul’s words, exactly, in the jungle. Would he be able to repeat them now, in the hotel’s icebox? The engine sputtered, caught, and they rolled out into the silver heat. Turning into the service drive, they gained the road unobserved. He gave one look back at the sprawling pile and pushed his foot to the floorboard. Beside him Lem chuckled again. “Ah, how much like the old days!”

Unopposed save by an occasional gharri, in a few minutes they gained the main street of Siem Reap. Stopping before the small hotel, Shepherd sent Lem in for directions to the airport. “And ask for the plane jockey.”

"He told me yesterday that he was going to work on it this morning."

"How much work?"

"Some cleaning of the plugs was all, I think."

"And I hope! Also find out if a woman named Bijou is around."

"Bijou?"

"Mam'selle Bijou, the artiste, and hurry without looking like it."

Nodding, he went inside. Shepherd glanced back the way they had come. Down the street a military policeman was looking toward the car, as though debating whether satisfying his curiosity was worth a hundred-yard walk. A swarm of youngsters sprang up to inspect him with the direct, measuring stares of childhood, and the policeman had started toward them when Lem reappeared with his deliberate quickness. Shepherd had the wheels moving before he was scarcely back in the seat.

"Well?"

"Straight ahead. My friend is out there, as he said. The Bijou person left last night after the dances. A truck from your hotel was going to Pnom-Penh, and accommodated her. Was she of importance?" as they cleared the town.

"It means she didn't do it."

"She had reason to?"

"Some—a hope I didn't have much hope for," he said dismissingly. "Now listen—tell your pal that Mr. Eng says he is to take us to Saigon."

"Saigon? But I thought—should not we make it for Bangkok?"

"And land there broke? With the pilot telling them at the field there that we forced him? Same old knuckle-head——"

"But Saigon——"

"It's only a couple of hours. Tell him he is to wait and bring us back. Diplomatic business. Money, to you."

"Ah! And you can get some there?"

"I think so."

"And after?"

"We may have to use the plane again."

"To be sure. He could head us where you decide, and then we could throw him out."

"We'll see. You're sure you did a good job on him last night?"

"One of my best. While I filled his sponge of a belly with beer I loaded his ears with what a VIP you are. I was somewhat boastful, but quite charming. In all, he was quite impressed."

"Good old Lem . . ."

A sentry was at the entrance to the airport, with several other soldiers sitting around a tin-covered shack. Slowing down, Shepherd flashed Duphaine's credentials and continued on to where a four-place plane stood near the twisted wreckage of a hangar. The pilot, wrench in hand, was on a short ladder set before its nose. He climbed down as they stopped and, seeing Lem, came to meet them eagerly.

"Looks like you bought enough drinks," Shepherd said.

"As I told you," Lem answered proudly. "But, mon dieu, where does he put them?"

Mr. Eng's pilot was a tiny Frenchman, with needlelike arms and legs poking from his shorts and negligible shirt. When he bowed respectfully, Shepherd judged that Lem's public relations had been sufficiently artful. Holding himself stiffly aloof, he waited as the two made a series of rapid exchanges in which he heard Lem sprinkle the word "diplomat." There was some surprise in the flier's manner, and hesitation, but at length he shrugged and joined in Lem's smile.

"He says he will be most happy to oblige you."

Shepherd gave a cold nod, saying curtly, "Tell him to open it up. We're in a hurry."

When Lem repeated the order the pilot ducked his slender head and hastened to remove the ladder. Pulling open a door marked with the Cambodian flag, Shepherd slid into the back seat. Clambering after him, Lem grinned.

"He said you do not look like the usual diplomat."

"No striped pants?"

"No brief case."

"You should've told him American diplomats only carry bank-books. He didn't seem to smell anything?"

"He's happy to go. He is bored. Shep—if you get enough money, I think an arrangement could be made with this bottomless barrel. Last night he was telling me——"

"Offhand I can't think of a fence for a hot airplane."

"I bet this fellow would know of one—and landing fields without too many questions."

"We'll see."

Zippering up a windbreaker, the pilot jumped into his seat and switched life into the propellers. The little craft bumped down the runway, gained momentum, and sprang airborne. Shepherd looked down. The soldiers' faces were turned up like a string of plates. The road to Siem Reap was empty. He leaned back against the leather seat. A start, at least . . .

Off the right wing tip lay the hotel—with Mr. Eng peering up unbelievably? And Peggy, at one of those shimmering windows, anxious about the gurgles and writhings which by now must be coming from Inspector Duphaine? What would she be thinking, feeling? Would tears be rolling over those pink-apple cheeks, sprung from a sense that this traveling dot against the sky was her last sight of him?

He strained for a last glimpse of the sprawling structure diminishing beyond the brown piles of ruins in their cleared park. Peggy, so little and distant now, yet still managing to project the quality that bubbled perpetually from the white curved fountain of her. How long before that sweet spring might be fortifying some other beneficiary against all cold, terror, and heart-break?

He shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, below was only the thick green, like a suspended tide waiting its own chosen time before rolling again.

Plagued by a semicircular canal that made flying a misery, Lem hung desperately to the reassurance of the hand strap beside his roar-filled head, too conscious of their thin floor above the swinging landscape even for questions.

Shepherd continued to watch the jungle's unremitting carpet, torn occasionally with tree-devoured lumps of unreconstructed stones. In that appalling trackless luxuriance Paul had made good

his claim of possessing a buzzard's sense of direction—had brought them straight as a string out of its manifold menaces to a peaceful, comfortable room where his last foe had found him. He looked out the other window.

The terrain swept flatly on. They passed over Pnom-Penh, the palace spires stiff and bright, the stupa crowning its hill casting a pyramidal shadow down its side like a torn scrap of velvet. The rubber plantations began, with buff-colored villas at their spacious centers, and the glinting checkerboards of rice fields. A village with its roofs burned off, empty walls open to the sky like a litter of discarded boxes; then the towers of Radio Saigon, and shortly thereafter the little plane was scudding along the pocked runway of the airport.

"Tell him we won't be long," Shepherd said.

Lem repeated the message, and the pilot's answer: "He says we must start back before dusk. He can't fly at night."

"Tell him he has orders to wait!"

A colonial sergeant came hastening as they climbed down. His bearing became less when he saw that the arrivals were not the dignitaries promised by the painted emblems, but urged by a foam of directives from Lem, backed by the pilot, he led them to a jeep and surlily dispatched them to town. Once started, Shepherd asked to have the driver take them to Cholon.

"Cholon?" Lem asked.

"Did you think I was going to put the arm on the desk clerk at the Continental?"

They spun through villages still unhealed from the conflict that had raged over them so tragically, municipal reports of broken walls, holes stove in cracked and blackened houses. Raw patches showed on villas and new sections of tile roofing. Yet there was a heartening, peasant flavor of life reasserting itself, stubbornly picking up threads broken by the repeated clashes between the French and Annamite militaries. Vines had begun to creep over the scars of shellfire. Blossoms soared from lilac trees like girls pleasurably stretching up their arms. Housewives, rolls of white cloth around their heads and market baskets on their hips, moved sedately along the edge of the road. Small fry

tumbled in its dust, making way just before the moment of collision with derisive hoots. Shepherd laughed to see a boy lying under a tree knocking down fruit with a slingshot.

"Kids," he said. "Thank God for the kids."

The driver was of a less sentimental turn. He yelled, shook his fist, swore incessantly as the blunt face of his vehicle roared down upon their last-instant yieldings of his right of way. But even his fierceness was of no avail in the Chinese quarter; the litmus of Cholon absorbed his complaints with sheer pressing numbers; forcing him to reduced speed. Shepherd directed him to Bijou's place, and by the time he reached it he was quiet with defeat.

"When are you French going to learn you can't scream these people down?" Shepherd asked Lem, jumping out onto the sidewalk.

Pushing open the door, he entered the empty foyer. In the main room the dance band was practicing a horrendous jump tune. His back turned, Joe the marlager straddled a chair, listening raptly. The rest of the tinsel cavern was deserted.

"Shep, what is this place?" Lem asked. "Is it——"

"Shhhi!" Indicating the stairs, he led the way up to the entresol. At the office door he listened, then flung it open and walked in. Bijou, seated on the floor before her low desk table, looked up from a column of figures. Closing the door behind them, he leaned against it, sliding the bolt handle.

"Hello, Bijou."

"What do you want?" Her eyes shifted between them.

"Paul Savery died last night. I thought you'd like to know."

She lit a cigarette and carefully shook out the little wax match.

"Well—thanks. There's no use saying I'm not relieved."

"You're in the clear, too. It happened after you'd left."

"What d'you mean?" she cried. "I didn't have that much against him! You mean he was killed?"

He nodded. "His ticker was bad. It stopped when somebody tried to burn something out of him through the soles of his feet. Maybe about those guns."

She leaned forward tensely. "Did they?"

"I wouldn't think so. With him going like that they must have been still trying."

"So it would seem." The long eyes regarded him fixedly. "Then what? You didn't chase all the way down here just to tell me this."

"Oh yes, I did," he assured her, and then said, "But there's more of it. Savery already had told me what he wouldn't tell them." As she started he went on: "So now I'm the only one who knows where that stuff is."

"Just you?"

"Just me."

Pushing the cigarette thoughtfully into a low bowl of sand, she sat up straighter, her hands dropping into her lap. "Well, shall I sit up and beg?"

"Do you want it all spelled out? The shipment's been landed and cached—where it can be taken by your boys who were going to grab it before. Are you still interested?"

The long fingernails on one blunt hand rapped a tattoo on the table, her gaze holding his with increasing intensity. "You know you needn't ask that—just like you know I can't be held up."

"Who said I was going to?"

"That sounds good," she said, her rigidity lessening a trifle. "But before you quote a price, just remember it can't be too heavy."

"Then get up what you can!" Lem's voice cracked out suddenly. "We've got to make for Siam in a hurry!"

She looked at him, then back at Shepherd. "Is that right, Shep? You'll take what I can pay?"

"Yes," he said, standing taller. "But not in money."

"What then?" she asked narrowly.

"A name. I want to know who killed Savery."

"And what makes——"

"Stop it! I'm working the lever now, and only me! Just a name, that's all I want! You can keep your dough—and I can keep a few things too, including my neck out of a squeeze. Tell me!" as her head slowly bent. "Come on, you big-mouthed patriot, you won't get them any other way! You said you'd give anything for

those guns—for the people you claim to love so much! All right, here's a chance to get them cheap! Just that name!"

Her eyes came up slowly and looked at Lem.

He screamed. His head flicked forward, with his knife out and flung while the enraged shriek still echoed in the closed room. There was a sound like a watermelon kicked. But before she fell over, the knife through her neck, she raised a gun in the hand below the table to shoot Lem three times in the stomach.

His back still against the door, Shepherd watched him slide down, curled and clutching at himself. The automatic drawn, he went around the table and looked down at Bijou. Her small profile was etched against a spreading stain on the rattan floor covering. She was, he saw, much deader than Lem, on the other side of the squat desk, still hugging his ripped middle.

As he bent over him the little man's eyes rolled weakly up. "It's the bad one, Shep," he said with a cough.

Shepherd nodded. "Too bad, all around, for me to get a doctor, Lem."

"Then—you did know it was me—at the hotel?"

"Not for sure. I had to bring you here to find out."

He grimaced. "I thought so, right there at the last." His eyes closed, then opened wide, petitioningly. "It could have been you I went for—but I made it her, didn't I, Shep?"

"Sure you did. I was counting on it."

"A dame—to get the bad one from a dame," in faint, enormous disgust.

Easing the sagging head with a pillow, Shepherd said, "I'd say better a pretty one than old Lady Guillotine." Then he took a pen and block of paper from the desk and wrote a few rapid lines.

"Confession?"

He nodded. "Duphaine still might take some convincing without it."

"He was so certain it was you," Lem said with a short painful laugh, signing his name. "What made you think of me?"

"Those burns on his feet, and remembering something you once told me."

"It's an old one," reproachfully. "It could have been anybody."

"Well, it had to be somebody. Bijou looked tied in—she was the only one on the outside who knew about the stuff. But you, Lem—why? Why?"

The little man closed his eyes. "Night before last, in Siem Reap—we got to talking in a hop house. She knew my name from something you said," as his face creased bitterly, "about my being a patriot. She said if we could tell the Sûreté where Savery's arms were, it would be a fine thing——"

"She'd have crossed you—even if you'd gotten away with killing him after he'd talked."

He gave a small smile. "I figured. I'd have got her first—and done just as she said, lying. Let his death die down—then say I happened on the hide-out. And when they found the stuff," he whispered, "they might have let me go home." He sighed, simply, as if too tired even for regret.

"Don't talk any more."

"Whatever you say, Shepherd——"

As he sat watching it empty, Shepherd wondered if France would take back the envelope, at least, of Jean-Louis Lemartine, who had loved some thing too.

XXVIII

INSPECTOR DUPHAINÉ looked up at the wooden blades slowly mixing the Sûreté's official odor of disinfectant and stale cigarette smoke, finishing a repetition of how satisfactorily the case was closed—"And of course there will be something in the nature of a reward for your information as to the contents of the warehouse at Vinh-long. Shall we put it that—upstairs is appreciative?"

Opposite his scarred desk Shepherd lolled on a chair, casual as a Restoration buck in a perfume shop, waiting for the reason for this summons. Last night, after Duphainé's arrival with Peggy and Eng in a commandeered vehicle, a period seemed to

have been put behind the episode. Lem's signed acceptance of responsibility had been taken as sufficient explanation for Savery's death, and the fingerprinted weapons and records of Lem and Bijou had cleared him of their debacle. But wary of the formalized routine of bureaucracy, he had complied with a telephone call to appear here in the inspector's office with some trepidation. The word "reward" came with a happy mixture of relief and appreciation—for it presented an eraser for the last item on the slate.

Taking the pawn slips from his wallet, he handed them over. "These call for about twenty-five thousand piastres at Tuey Fung's shop in Cholon—against some of Mme. Savery's jewelry. If you'll return them to her, I'll be satisfied."

The detective examined the claim checks, his forehead wrinkling slightly. "She made no mention of this when I visited her home this morning. But so many tumbling events—perhaps she forgot."

"I dare say. Do you think upstairs will chuck its lunch?"

Duphaine again glanced up at the floor as if overlooking an impertinence. "The Air France agent was here when I arrived. She was arranging for passage to Paris. Of course I told her that so far as we are concerned she may leave at her convenience. But such a long journey from here . . ." He held up a thin hand and flipped the fingers, saying, "Bangkok, Rangoon, Calcutta, Jodhpur, Jask, Bagdad, Beyrouth, Corfu, Marseille—Paris. An arduous flight for a lady alone, do not you think?"

"Mme. Savery is not a lady to be alone for long." As Duphaine's eyes bore inquiringly down to him he shook his head. "I am quite certain that she must have been inquiring about only one place on that plane."

Duphaine nodded. "However, there are many stops on the way."

"I trust that she will find them interesting," Shepherd said, smiling thinly. "If I were going in that direction I could give her a few tips. But I'm still headed in the other direction—in case you find that interesting."

"Oddly, perhaps, but I do. And I am pleased."

"Yes?"

The detective's gaze drifted to a fly-speckled window. "A most charming person, Mme. Savery."

"If you're so disposed," annoyance entering his voice. "For me, I tend toward a—less complicated type."

"Ah, I quite agree. Such as Miss George, if I may say so. She was so distressed when she finally untrussed me yesterday," in a tone of charmed amusement. "A most engaging refreshment of a girl—an article of faith in the dark testament of these times." He paused, and his eyes again met Shepherd's. "May I ask if you are thus disposed?"

"Quite, Inspector—quite."

Duphaine opened a drawer in the desk and filed the slips. "I should say that the occurrence at Bijou's was most fortuitous for you—and for us as well," with a tired frown. "We do our best, but so many new ones keep appearing, in so many unexpected places."

"What you've promised about Lcm I've already thanked you for," Shepherd said; "how hard as it may be for you to agree, in Bijou's way there's nothing to be said for her. She believed, Duphaine, and that's important! She was patriotic really, where my old friend was mostly homesick. Can you see that she gets a little more than just a hole in the ground?"

"Peace will come, Mr. Shepherd," Duphaine answered, a light flush suffusing his leathery cheeks. "Let us hope that when it does it will find many changes—the profligates gone, men of good will administering laws that will be to the advantage of all. One also may hope that desirable time may arrive without you of the outside world believing us entirely barbarous. In that you appear to need it, you have my assurance that she will be decently buried."

"Thank you again." He got up. "Well then, I guess that about does it."

"But for this——" Rising, from the open drawer beside him he took a small paper folder. "It was necessary for me to obtain your credentials from the hotel last evening. Only, I assure you," he explained to Shepherd's hardening expression, "in order to

facilitate the execution of a token of appreciation approved by my superiors—tickets for you and Miss George to Shanghai on the boat that will arrive tomorrow.”

Shepherd took the packet. Inside were their passports and two slips that seemed to flash “Exit” through the hot, dim room. He smiled in brief acknowledgment as they clasped hands. “It’s always a pleasure to do business with thorough people.”

“We do our best.” Duphaine came around the desk and as they moved to the door said, “This all could make something of a book, no?”

“If it ever does I’ll dedicate it to you. It’s for good luck, signing to a good man.”

He descended through moldy corridors, down to the gate where huddled the patient, frightened women of Annamites awaiting trials. After the nondescript structure’s interior, the street seemed beneficently colored and alive under the late afternoon sun. He took a deep, satisfied breath, moving to the curb to hail a ricksha. A horn honked, and behind the wheel of her car Alix appeared out of the flaring gold rays like a close mirage. She released the door.

“I’ll take you——”

“Again?” as he got in beside her.

Meshing the gears, she gave him a puzzled glance and he said, “No matter. What are you doing here? You weren’t called, were you?”

“No, Inspector Duphaine said that nothing more was necessary. But for you? They told me at the hotel that you had received a message.”

“He had something for me.”

“That is understandable—after the credit he will receive as to poor Paul’s enterprise.”

He looked at her quickly, but her face bore as little resentment as had her tone. Above the delicate lace frothing from her shark-skin jacket it was characteristically composed and easily gracious. “You’re a good loser.”

“I do have a facility for adjustments, that is all. Just how much, I find with surprise, I did not know.” She hesitated, then with

her eyes still on the boulevard's miscellany: "That money would have been expeditious—but I am not precisely penniless. There is still enough for us to——"

"No."

She gave a small nod, as though she had foreseen his answer. But after another block she turned briefly and made the suggestion of a reprimanding face. "You are not precisely complimentary, do you think? Could it be that I failed your expectations—on other counts?"

So, for all her self-reliance, she was another of those who needed that fear-banishing, reiterated assurance. Would they never learn that any of them were champions when a releasing love was mixed up in it? Like Peggy . . . And thinking of Peggy, kindness had him say, "No—you're the best there, Alix."

She colored. "And you, as always, are so direct! That was not a question out of vanity," she declared defensively. "Sometimes it may be that people may simply not find themselves—attuned."

"It's other ways that we don't hit it off, you know that. The ones that make for ^{the} ~~the~~ haul."

"These other ways ^{are} ~~are~~," she asked hopefully, "do you not think I might . . . ?"

He shook his head. "Nor do you want them, really. You know where you're going and what you'll do there. It's another world from the one I like, and you should be a great success in it. So great that I don't suppose I'll ever see or even hear of you again."

"Shep——"

But he continued: "Châteaux, private beaches, country seats, a few select shielded mansions, and game preserves with beaters in quaint costumes—all with no, oh, absolutely no publicity."

"You mock," she said quietly, "but that is how I have always hoped it to be. Why do you find it so wrong?"

"A matter of taste buds, maybe."

She bent slightly forward, her elbows raising as if to push aside the interference of the languid traffic, or to infuse it with some of her own wish to be up and doing. He could not tell, and did not try. Her vagaries were unimportant now; she already was receding into the past—"a girl I once knew"—driving through

the tired streets of a colonial town that she soon would leave, and its likes, forever. And the likes of him as well . . .

"But before you do," he said suddenly, "tell me one thing. That kiss in front of the hotel—was it what you said, impulsive, or a pitch at getting Paul and me started toward—settling things for you? Just for the record," as she remained silent, "were you still scheming, that far along?"

She accepted the bow of a métis policeman who waved her on at an intersection. "In my room at Angkor you would not listen," she answered after a minute, "or I would have told you then. . . . Can you understand how one may start on a path, all plans directed, and then find them changing until the path becomes intertwined with the objective itself?"

"Thanks. That was nice of you."

Down Rue Catinat the Continental bulged above the trees. As they neared it she made a request in a voice of anxious despair. "Dear Shep—if it is possible, do not think harshly of me because—well, that the fixatives of my heart may differ from yours."

"Of course," he said gently. "Be [redacted] me, Alix, I know that each of us has his own form of des' [redacted]"

Tears rolled out on her lower [redacted] [redacted] over, and made damp blotches on her stiff lapels. The car stopped before the hotel.

"Then good-by——"

"Good-by."

The car rolled on, urging her forward into the future of her needs, another step toward the gilded echelons of her choice. He could fancy them—those protected citadels of the vastly rich—another magnificent hostess and occasional bedmate for some secret man who would need the first more than the latter. The cartel crowd was to be congratulated, he thought, watching her disappear; it was drawing a very special member.

Turning toward the entrance, he saw Peggy at a terrace table with Taras. Her eyes were blue lances across the intervening space, impaling him and drawing him to her questions and the drummer's poorly masked disappointment.

"What an unexpected pleasure!"

"Dies hard, d-doesn't she?"

"That you'd like to see, wouldn't you?" as he drew out a chair. "Well, Mr. Taras! Haven't you left town yet—or just coming back?"

"What did she w-want?"

"To say so long. Lots of orders, Mr. Taras?"

"Not too bad here in Saigon, thank you," Taras said uncomfortably. "There are many things needed in my line. But alas! The country is still too disengaged, and perhaps impoverished, to visit the outlands. No, I will forgo them this trip. My agenda now calls to continue on to Shanghai on the boat which arrives tomorrow."

"Where's sh-she going?" from Peggy, the bristle still in her voice.

"Paris," he told her, and "Say now, that's nice," to the drummer. "We're sailing too. Perhaps when we get there we may shake for the drinks again. You may have better luck."

Rather hastily, Taras took out his wallet and slid a bill under his saucer. "I am char^ged that we shall again be fellow voyagers." He stood, at once backing away. "Well—until then."

"But don't bring," Shepherd called after his fat, hastening back.

"So she's g-going to Paris?"

"For a start, I suppose. Wherever, it makes no difference to me, Peg. Honest to God."

"R-really and t-truly?"

"You know, don't you, really and truly?"

"I hope so."

"You know so!"

"I know so," she said obediently.

"And you'll never leave me?"

"Oh, Shep!" Her face writhed in happiness and pain until nothing showed of her eyes but the compressed lashes. "Oh golly—I'm so happy I could c-c-c-c—"

"Cry?"

"—crow!" she said triumphantly. "What was that about s-sailing?"

He passed her the ticket folder and her hands tore at it like excited mice. "Why, it's so!" when she had it open. "We are!"

His gaze had moved to the corner around which Alix's car had turned. "That's right," he said. "Provided you got enough from Dracot to fill out what I lack for"—his head jerked toward the hotel—"I addition."

"S-sure I have. I'm l-loaded! Oh, Shep! I'm s-so glad!"

His eyes came back to her. She was looking at him across the table, searchingly. "I'm glad because it means that all of this is behind us," she said without stammering. "All of it—her m-most. I'm sorry I was so nasty when I saw you l-last night," she went on steadily, "after what happened to Lem and all. But it's over n-now; I thought it out in b-bed. It isn't your f-fault that you get in trouble when I'm not around," after a deliberative pause. "That's j-just you, and it was my f-fault for not being with you. I won't d-do it again."

"See that you don't, do you hear?"

She nodded emphatically. "And [REDACTED] made plans too!" As she began to scrounge in her hand [REDACTED] came to his side.

"M'sieur désire?"

"Lime squash." A small bit of paper [REDACTED] onto his lap. He looked up but the man already had moved away.

"A letter from Mama just caught up with m-me," Peggy was saying. "Listen—and I think it is time that you were coming home, Margaret"—Margaret! Holy s-smoke!"

Shielding it with the table top, he unfolded the note and read:

What I told you about is ready. I am waiting down the street in a blue taxi.

JOE

"Anyway, she says that my f-father hasn't been feeling too well and they want me there. So we'll get m-married," she said hurriedly, "and g-go there—where you can rcst and then g-get back at your writing again."

"What?" he asked. He was recalling the wise eyes of Bijou's manager, his promise of "something big."

"On our f-farm in Manitoba. Oh, it's not very g-grand—but it's comfortable, and f-food like you've never had——"

His mind, propelled by the lift of his pulse, had begun to whirl around the missive in his hand. Something stirring from the place in Cholon, probably; as manager, Joe must have been in on her capers. And the boat should be sailing the day after tomorrow. He was breathing harder, the blood pounding so in his ears that he did not hear Peggy's hopeful voice:

"—and the ch-chance for you to get going again at your r-real job."

He said: "Honey, I have to go see a man for a while. Why don't you go upstairs and wait for me? I shan't be long."

Her eyes, held from him while she had worked through what she had to say, flashed to his face. "You weren't l-listening, were you?" faintly.

"I—well, baby, I'm afraid that I wasn't, exactly. But you tell me all about what it was when I get back."

Fear crept into the silence. "What would you have t-to go see anybody about? . . . ha. Shep—it couldn't be th-that——"

"No, no! I told you over. Never was, really. This is a man—about maybe S. . . honey."

The fear became an active, leaping presence. "Not a d-deal!" she cried in a panicky whisper. "Not another . . . ?"

He frowned, holding down his impatience to be gone. He showed her the note, then tore it in pieces. "I don't know what it is—but it might be too good to pass up. See how I feel about you, telling you?" He smiled. "Never did that before, did I?"

"No," she thought with shock, "you never did!" And the recognition gave her a new spurt of alarm. Had he become that much more—brazen? "But why r-risk anything now?" she asked, all her joy gone. "We d-don't need m-money! You said there'll be m-more waiting in Shanghai!"

"It's supposed to be. But how can I be certain until it's in my hands? The people I trade with—well, they're not exactly trustworthy, y'know." Standing, he said placatingly, "Come now, honey—be a good girl."

"Don't do it, Shep! From China we can g-go to my f-folks'

place in Canada, and f-forget all about all of this! Or—just remember the part you m-might want to write about. Oh, please—please!”

She saw dismally that he was angering, but controlling it as he most always did with her. He was wearing the look she detested, the farawayness that visited his beloved face when he was in one of these spells, charging it with foxlike sharpness.

His lips bent disdainfully back from his teeth. “Write? For why? Knock your brains out for a year to make a thousand dollars? Unpack yourself so a lot of people can sneer at your strewn guts?”

“Go see wh-what it is,” she said, her head lowering. “I’ll w-wait here.” She felt his hand give her shoulder a brief pat, and with her resistance yielded, the words he dropped down were less bitter:

“Maybe I didn’t mean quite all of that, honey. We’ll talk some more about what you said later. But just now—oh, can’t you see, Peg? What kind of a wife are you going to make”—in the soft-grating voice that made her melt in his wax—“if you don’t see I’m not ready yet just to describe my lives?”

He was gone. Hurrying to that black hole he would continue to answer similar signals—past changing. Her husband; for he had said, and the lump eased above her heart, “wife.” . . .

She picked up her glass and wet her lips. Dusk was beginning to paint shadows across the terrace. The idling men were gazing in her unattended direction more interestedly now, and she looked out over the trees to the sky’s carbon-paper blue. In a little time it would be punctured with stars and a round rent moon. The same moon and stars that for all its thousands of miles of space and difference she so often had watched in Canada. Would it be over Manitoba now, white with frost and only becoming so like a rotting peach when it got this far? She could see it shining down on the tiny scattered lights—hear laughter carrying across the snow, the grave sound of chimes. All around there would be the beginning of distance that never stopped until it reached the Pole, and then fell over on the other side in wonder. Yet behind one of the illuminated dots in that

reaching vastness was Mama, putting on weight now like all the women on her side, but as pretty as ever—Pop with his paper by the fireplace, calling out every now and then to ask what she was doing if she was too long from the room. . . . Home.

She was twenty-four. Time for one of her own. But would she ever? Would she ever? Or on, just on to the hotels that Shep said were the best houses, staffed and without taxes or demanding repairs?

Shivering in the warmth of the fading day, she saw their road: she laughing more loudly, trying more desperately to be funny for people she loathed, his arrogant head raised like a setter at point to new cities, new “prospects,” “deals”—excitements; drinking more, overaffable with chance acquaintances, not so handsome, less commanding, fuming more often about his luck, losing what drew people to him, getting older without dignity, wisdom, or peace. . . .

“Oh, my boy!” her mind cried in unutterable truth for them both. “Oh, my bad boy—what have you done to yourself?”

